# THE HISTORY OF SUICIDE IN INDIA

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# THE HISTORY
## OF
# SUICIDE IN INDIA

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OF
# SUICIDE IN INDIA
*An Introduction*

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To
the memory of my younger brother
DHIRENDRA THAKUR
whom Fate snatched away
in the prime of his youth.

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# FOREWORD

On account of its very nature, the subject of suicide does not, ordinarily, provoke sustained curiosity. The question put by Hamlet, "To be or not to be," poses before most minds a purely ethical problem. Shakespeare also referred to, "A sea of troubles" and "The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks the flesh is heir to," as factors responsible for suicide. However, it is not difficult to perceive, after a little reflection, that the methods of ending life and the circumstances leading to that cruel decision, are probably as varied as those of procuring means for supporting it. Yet a scientific study of suicide, of the problem of conscience *vis-a-vis* the thousand natural shocks it receives, has disclosed considerable scope for arriving at several general conclusions. Dr. Upendra Thakur's *The History of Suicide in India* is a part of such study.

Based on a series of articles originally contributed by Dr. Thakur to a journal devoted to forensic studies this work contains much material of historical interest. Dr. Thakur has shown that religious suicide prevailed in India since time immemorial. People had various theories about what they called life beyond death; and self destruction was resorted to in a belief that it was good investment for a later instalment of living again. Dr. Thakur has given ample proof in support of his contention that all major religions in India deprecated suicide. He has noted some interesting examples of religious suicide, in ancient, mediaeval and modern periods. In this connexion, his references to Vedic

literature and to the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki would be found to be of more than ordinary interest. I have appended to this Introduction* an extract from a letter of 29 November, 1822, written by Capt. Douglas containing a vivid case-study of religious suicide in Central India.

Dr. Thakur has made a detailed study of the Institution of *Satī*; and of the mass suicide which was known under the name of *Jauhar* in Rajasthan. One may note that the word, *Jauhar*, is derived from the Sanskrit *Yama-gṛha* whose derivatives were *Jamahar* and *Janvhar* in old and modern Gujarati-Rajasthani.

Dr. Thakur would secure considerable agreement in regard to his view that the section of the Indian Penal Code dealing with suicide deserves amendment. In fact, the whole topic requires careful examination : the doctrine of *satyagraha* has accommodated suicide as an ultimate measure of persuasion; and the historians would doubtless notice that the matter was of more than academic interest in recent years.

I am glad that Dr. Thakur has furnished in his work a valuable background to the proper understanding of this difficult problem.

4, *Circular Road*, S. V. SOHONI
*Patna*.
18-10-1962.

EXTRACT FROM A MANUSCRIPT 1822*

"Listen now to the inducements which the local Sivite gospel holds forth to devotees to cast themselves from the rock. 'At Omkar-Mandhatta is Kala Bhairava. Regarding it, Parbati (wife of Siva) said unto twenty-five crores of the daughters of the Gandharvas (angels) : "Your nuptials will be with persons who shall have cast themselves over the rock." Whoever thus devotes himself to Kala Bhairava will receive forgiveness, even though he had killed a

rahman. Let the devotee make a figure of the sun on a cloth; and take two flags, a club, and a *chawar* in his hands, and proceed joyously with music to the rock. Whoever shall bodily cast himself down and die, will be married to a Gandharva. But if he falls faint-heartedly his lot will be in hell. Whosoever turns back again in terror, each step that he takes shall be equivalent to the guilt of killing a Brahman; but he who boldly casts himself over, each step that he takes is equal in merit to the performance of a sacrifice. Let no Brahman cast himself from the rock. A devotee who has broken his vows, a patricide, or one who has committed incest, shall by thus sacrificing himself become sinless.'

"In 1822, a European officer of our Government witnessed the death of almost the last victim to Kala Bhairava at this shrine. The island then belonged to a native State (Sindia), and our Government had not then begun to interfere with such bloody rites. The political officer who wrote the account of it was therefore unable to prevent it by force. I came on the description a few years ago in MS., hidden away among many other forgotten papers in the Government record room of the Nimar district. The concluding portion may be interesting, as perhaps the only account on record, by an eye-witness of such an occurrence. After narrating how he vainly urged every argument, on the youth to dissuade him from his design, the writer proceeds to relate how he accompanied him nearly upto the fatal rock. "I took care," he says, "to be present at an early hour at the representation of Bhyroo (Bhairava) a rough block of basalt smeared with red paint, before which he must necessarily present and prostrate himself, ere he mounted to the lofty pinnacle whence to sparing on the idol. Ere long he arrived, preceded by rude music. He approached the amorphous countenance. As soon as this subsided and repeatedly during the painful scene, I addressed myself to him, in the most urgent possible manner, to recede from his rash resolve, pledging myself to ensure him protection and competence for his life. I had taken the precaution to have a boat close at hand, which in five minutes would have transported us beyond the sight of the multitude. In vain I urged him. He now more resolutely replied that it was beyond human power to remove the sacrifice of the powerful Bhyroo; evincing the most indomitable determination, and displaying so great an infatuation as even to request me to save him from the fell dagger of the priestess, should he safely alight upon the idol. So deep-rooted a delusion could only be surmounted by force; and to exercise that I was unauthorised. While confronted with the idol his delusion gained strength; and the barbarous throng cheered with voice and hand, when by his motions he indicated a total and continued disregard of my persuasions to desist. He made his offering of coconuts, first breaking one; and he emptied into a gourd presented by the priestess his previous collectioni in the nut shell, first making her son drink some from his hand, to obviate all suspicion of its being drugged. A little was poured in libation on the idol. She hinted to him to deliver to her the silver rings he wore. In doing so, he gave a proof of singular collectedness. One of the first he took off he concealed in his mouth till he had presented to her all the rest, when, searching among the surrounding countenances, he pointed to a man to whom he ordered this ring to be given. It was a person

who had accompanied him from Oojein. An eagerness was now evinced by several to submit bracelets and even betel nuts to his sacred touch. He composedly placed such in his mouth and returned them. The priestess at last presented him with a *pan* leaf, and he left the spot with a firm step, amidst the plaudits of the crowd. During the latter half of his ascent he was much concealed from view by shrubs. At length he appeared to the aching sight, and stood in a bold and erect posture upon the fatal eminence. Some short time he passed in agitated motions on the stone ledge, tossing now and then his arms aloft as if employed in invocation. At length he ceased; and, in slow motions with both his hands, made farewell salutations to the assembled multitude. This done, he whirled down the coconuts, mirror, knife and lime, which he had continued to hold; and stepping back was lost to view for a moment—a pause that caused the head to swim, the heart to sink, and the flesh to creep. The next second he burst upon our agonised sight in a most manful leap, descending feet foremost with terrific rapidity, till, in mid career, a projecting rock reversed his position, and caused a headlong fall. Instant death followed this descent of ninety feet, and terminated the existence of this youth, whose strength of faith and fortitude would have adorned the noblest cause, and must command admiration when feelings of horror have subsided. Thus closed, the truly appalling scene.'"

# PREFACE

In 1954, Sri Biren Mukerjee, Inspector (now Asst. Commissioner) of the Calcutta Police very kindly invited me to write a series of three articles on suicide for publication in *Calcutta Police Journal*, of which he was the editor. I readily accepted his offer and wrote the articles; (i) 'Suicide in Ancient India', (ii) 'Suicide in Mediæval India' and (iii) 'Suicide in Modern India', which were published in three issues (Nos. 1-3) of the Journal in the same year and highly spoken of by learned critics. When I was collecting material for my study I was convinced that a separate and independent volume could be written on this very interesting topic, tracing its history right from Vedic times down to the present day. I pursued the idea further and after six years of my consistent research and labour I have been able to complete this work.

*Suicide* is a favourite subject in the Western world, but it has not yet attracted due notice of the scholars in our country. We have, as such, no literature at all, worth the name on suicide. Our ancient and mediaeval writers have treated of this subject very indifferently in their law-books, and that too, by way of only making passing references, which dwell upon the moral and religious aspects of suicide. To these authorities socio-economic aspects of the question did not have any appeal, and an *ātmaghātaka*, (a person committing suicide) other than religious, deserved no sympathy, not even a kind word from them. On the other hand, religious suicides are highly recommended and in most

cases glorified. The dawn of the twentieth century, however, brought about some revolutionary changes in our concept of social and moral values, and suicide ceased to be an object of public condemnation, an object of jeers and tears; on the contrary, it evoked genuine sympathy of the people at large, and came to be considered as a cause of grave concern to the authorities who became serious about getting at the root of this evil rather than punishing and humiliating the dead bodies of those unfortunate ones who indulged in self-destruction, as was the practice in some western countries. In other words, suicide now came to be recognised as an important branch of sociological study, which in the course of time came to be encouraged by most of the civilized Governments of the world. Unfortunately for us, however, no attempt has been made by our national government in this direction. And, we have no statistics on suicide prepared by the Government in our country to rely upon. In these circumstances the sundry news-items appearing in English and Indian language dailies and weeklies are our only source of information regarding the data of suicide in India of date. I need hardly add that this dearth of material presents a very difficult task before those who want to undertake such studies. As a result of this basic difficulty, I know I have had to work against innumerable odds and sometimes even thought of giving it up altogether. I, therefore, do not know how far I have succeeded in my present endeavour which, I believe, is the first of its kind in this field and is bound to suffer from various lapses and shortcomings as is usual with such works.

The present dissertation consists of five chapters in all. The first chapter introduces the subject itself

and enumerates the different sources which form the basis of our study. In the second chapter I have dealt with the various causes and influences that have been operating on man's mind throughout the ages, driving him to end his precious life. The third chapter treats of suicides—general, historical and religious—and traces its history from early times to the present day. The fourth chapter deals with the age-old institutions of *Satī* and *Jauhar*, which occupy an important place in the history of India, and which were, in a sense, mass-suicides. And, finally, in the fifth chapter I have presented a comparative study of suicides in China, Japan, Burma, Russia and other Asiatic countries and also in the Western world.

It has been my aim to draw attention to some features of suicide in India, hitherto ignored, and to present an objective and critical study. It would not be out of place here to acknowledge my obligations and thanks to some of my friends who have laid me under a heavy debt by helping me in all possible ways. My thanks are, first of all, due to my esteemed friend Sri Biren Mukerjee, Asst. Commissioner, Calcutta Police, who inspired and encouraged me to undertake my present study. To Dr. R. S. Sharma, Professor and Head of the Department of History, Patna University, and to Prof. Radhakrishna Choudhary, Head of the Department of History, G.D. College, Begusarai, I owe much for their ungrudging help and encouragement. My friend, Sri R. P. Shrivastava, M. COM., has, as usual, helped me financially and in other possible ways in all stages of the writing of this volume and it is difficult to express my gratitude to him in words. I am very much grateful to Sri Rajeshwar Jha, Librarian, Bihar Research Society, for his valuable assistance from

time to time and to Dr. B. S. Verma for preparing the plates. And finally, I must acknowledge my profound gratitude to Sri S. V. Sohoni, I.C.S. who not only gave me valuable suggestions but has increased my debt to him by kindly contributing a Foreword to this book. To Sri Manoharlal Jain, Proprietor, Messrs. Munshi Ram Manohar Lal, Delhi, I am grateful for his taking special interest in the publication of this volume. The authorities of the Central Library, Calcutta University, also deserve my thanks for granting me all possible facilities to carry on this piece of research.

I am fully alive to the limitations and lapses in this book for which I crave the indulgence of learned scholars and readers.

*Patna University.* UPENDRA THAKUR
20 June, 1962.

# LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Plate

I. No. 1. Vīrakal from village Buram, Manbhum Dt., Bihar. (10th century A.D.)

No. 2. Satī memorial Stone from village Budhpur, Manbhum Dt., Bihar. (10th century A.D.)

II. No. 1. Satī memorial stone from Budhpur. (10th century A.D.)

No. 2. Satī memorial stone from Buram. (10th century A.D.)

III. Nos. 1 & 2. Satī memorial stones from Budhpur. (9th—11th century A.D.)

IV. No. 1. Satī memorial stone from Budhpur. (9th—11th century A.D.)

No. 2. Satī memorial stone from Budhpur. (10th century A.D.)

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No. 2. Sattī-satta Plaques from Ahicchatra. (9th—11th century A.D.)

VII. Nos. 1 & 2. Satti-sattā Plaques from Ahicchatra. (A.D. 850—1100.)

VIII. Nos. 1 & 2. Sattī-sattā Plaques from Ahicchatra (A.D. 850—1100).

# ABBREVIATIONS

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| *ABORS* | .. | Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute. |
| *Arth.* | .. | *Arthaśāstra* of Kauṭilya, ed. by Shamasastry. |
| *ASIR* | .. | Report of the Archaeological Survey of India. |
| *CII* | .. | *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum.* |
| *CPJ* | .. | *Calcutta Police Journal.* |
| *EI* | .. | *Epigraphia Indica.* |
| *ERE* | .. | *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. XII, 1921. |
| *IA* | .. | *Indian Antiquary.* |
| *IB* | .. | *Inscriptions of Bengal.* |
| *JASB* | .. | Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. |
| *JBORS* | .. | Journal of the Bihar & Orissa Research Society. |
| *JRAS* | .. | Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal. |
| *JUPHS* | .. | Journal of the U.P. Historical Society. |
| *Mbh* | .. | *Mahābhārata.* |
| *ṚV* | .. | *ṚgVeda.* |
| *Sat. Brā.* | .. | *Satapatha Brāhmaṇa.* |
| *SBE* | | Sacred Books of the East. |
| *TK* | .. | *Tīrthavivecana-Kāṇḍam* of *Kṛtyakalpataru* of Lakṣmīdhara Bhaṭṭa, ed. by K. V. Rangaswami Aiyangar, Baroda, 1942. |
| *Vāj. Saṁ.* | .. | *Vājasaneyi Saṁhitā.* |
| *Vas. Dh. S.* | .. | *Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra.* |

CHAPTER I

# INTRODUCTION : SOURCES

## I

SUICIDE is one of the voluntary human acts on which statistical works have dwelt with special predilection. It is one of the chief subjects of social science now engaging the minds of modern sociologists. In the words of Henry Morselli, "the psychological meaning of this moral fact has always been enveloped in metaphysical obscurity, because suicide appears less susceptible of positive appreciation than all other expression of the human will. The social significance of voluntary death began to be evident when a comparison was made between *homicide* and *suicide*."[1] The true literature of suicide—searching for and analysing various social and non-social causes—did not arise before the time of the philosophic movement in the West which distinguished the second half of the 18th century. It is not that this important aspect of our social life was altogether ignored by the ancients : on the otherhand, they had their own conception of, and laws for, such acts involving self-killing. Almost all the ancient civilisations of the world —Indian, Greek, Latin and others—were familiar with these abnormal acts, and "Greek and Latin civilisations had often seen their best representative men lost to them by means of suicide."[2] But it is certain that this subject of self-destruction which now agitates the minds of

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[1] Henry Morselli, *Suicide*, pp. 2 ff.
[2] *Ibid.*

sociologists and criminologists all over the world did not enter into its positive phase until after statistical researches.

According to several western sociologists,[1] the word *suicidium* was used for the first time by Desfontaines in the 18th century. The words *propriicidium* (Latin) and *avtoxeipia* (from the Greek) were also formed at about the same time.[2] From the study of classical literature—Indian and Western—we have it that the character attributed to suicide was simply individual. The old philosophy of individualism had given to suicide the character of liberty and spontaneity. Religion and laws—which once sanctioned this heinous act of self-destruction—have now declared it to be criminal. Moreover, they have risen to the consideration of the crime under the more generic aspect of a tendency certainly hurtful, but one connected with the natural development of society. It has now aroused the interest of the sociologists and psychologists to study it no longer "as the expression of individual and independent faculties, but certainly as a social phenomenon allied with all other racial forces."[3]

## II

Modern sociologists assert that "the interest of the society in the existence of its members is not absolute, but that it decreases greatly, and even ceases altogether, in the case of voluntary death. On its side biology shows that in the struggle for existence it is the weakest, those least adapted to the social life, who succumb. Suicide is one of the forms of this de-

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[1] Emile Durkheim, *Le Suicide*, pp. 2 ff.

[2] For details, see the author's paper "Suicide in Ancient India" in *CPJ*, vol. ii, 1954, No. 1.

[3] H. Morselli, *op. cit.*, pp. 2 ff.

feat."[1] Suicide, according to them, is opposed to homicide : if one increases, the other decreases. And, that way, suicide is of real advantage in the interest of the security of the State.

We have discussed the various psychological and sociological factors operating within and from without upon our life and day to day activities in the next chapter. Melancholiac suffering, very often actuated by altruistic motives, drives a man on to take his own life. As among the civilised, so among the savages. Most of the causes leading to suicide in the ancient and the mediaeval world have been attributed to miserable poverty; disappointed love or jealousy; illness or old age; grief over the death of a child, a husband or a wife; fear of punishment, remorse, shame or wounded pride, anger or revenge.[2]

Then, there is religion. Various faiths take their own view of suicide. Sometimes, they recommend it, sometimes they resolutely and uncompromisingly oppose it. Sometimes it is denounced as an absolutely degrading act; often it is acclaimed as a very noble way to attain blissful immortality. Notwithstanding all acclamations and denunciations, suicides, since ancient times, have been, more or less, going on unabated, unchecked all over the globe. Whether we like it or not, the problem is there with all its horrible possibilities and we have got to face it.

It is erroneous to say that self-destruction has often been a fruit of higher civilisation. Statistics, on the other hand, generally show that "there is a greater propensity to suicide among savages than among civi-

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[1] See the author's paper, "Suicide in Mediaeval India" in *CPJ*, vol. ii (1954), No. 2, pp. 1-20.

[2] Westermarck, *Origin and Development of Moral Ideas*, vol. ii, pp. 232 ff.

lised peoples,"[1] though we have good grounds to believe that "among several uncivilised races suicide is said to be unknown"[2]—for example, the Andaman Islanders[3] and various Australian tribes.[4] Moreover, among many savage and barbarian races suicide is stated to be rare, or only occasional.[5]

Insanity has been one of the significant factors responsible for suicide through the ages. It so happens that insane persons, left unguarded, neglected and uncared for, are seized with a suicidal feat and end their life in the non-moral act of self-destruction. How to account for this? Psychologists tell us that impulses, often of absurd or criminal nature, get the upper hand, haunt and obsess the imagination. The patient knows perfectly well about the irrationality of such impulses, but he is too weak-minded to control them. This leads to intentional self-destruction. Man is, after all, a rational animal. But, the beastly instincts of the brute animal lie dormant in him. They are, however, checked and tamed by his rationality. So long as he has control over his desires, divinity in him has full scope for growth, but when his desires get possession of him satanity gets a violent break and plays havoc with his otherwise innocuous instincts. Hence, various shocking crimes.

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[1] Steinmetz, "Suicide among Primitive Peoples" in *American Anthropologist*, vii, 60.

[2] Paulitschke, *Ethnographie Nordost-Afrikas*, p. 205 (Danakil and Galla); Munzinger, *Ostafrikanische Studien*, p. 532 (Barea & Kunama); New, *Life, Wanderings and Labours in Eastern Africa*, p. 99; Lumboltz, *Unknown Mexico*, i, p. 243 etc.

[3] Man, *Jour. Anthro. Ins.*, xii, p. 111.

[4] Grey, *Expeditions of Discovery in North-West and Western Australia*, ii, p. 248; E. Westermarck, *The Origin and Development of Moral Ideas*, vol. ii, pp. 229-30.

[5] Westermarck, *op. cit.*, pp. 230 ff.

## III

Human behaviour, according to thinkers, is largely acquired, not instinctive, and man can adapt himself to circumstances. "Society wills today that we should suffer and die on the battle-field, even as at other periods it willed self-immolation or dying under the car of Jagannātha. Our minds are warped by the social system" and "fear of society is stronger than fear of spells."[1] With the march of time our life has become more and more complicated and society more and more complex. What was once considered a vicious crime and vehemently condemned by society as a whole, is now a matter of little interest to the people at large. Old conventions and restrictions are worn out and new conceptions of society and moral values have taken their place. Suicides are now not generally looked down upon as a crime; on the other hand they have become, more or less, an object of genuine sympathy with the people who have little, or practically no time, to give serious thought to such trifling matters when they are faced with a greater problem of life—the struggle for existence.

As years roll by, this struggle is also becoming more and more acute. New forces—social and otherwise—have given rise to new problems which directly affect the very existence of man. Old laws and methods cannot help solve his problems and difficulties anymore. His capability for adaptability to new circumstances has also taught him new ways and means to cope with the new situation. His tottering superstitions are considerably shattered; his old habits changed; his old mode of

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[1] *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. xii (on Suicide); also see *Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences*, vol. xiv (on Suicide); *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. xxi (14th Ed.), pp. 532 ff; *Chambers Encyclopaedia*, vol. ix, (New Edition), (On Suicide).

thinking and reasoning influenced and his old methods outdated. There has thus been a revolutionary change in all the walks of his life. This new man is now employing new methods to achieve his purpose—social or anti-social, constructive or criminal. His murderous or suicidal feats have also assumed a new shape, a new colour, a new look in keeping with the new times. But, though his methods have changed, his primitive instincts are there all the same.[1]

## IV

A few words about the sources of our study. Before dealing with the source-material, let us, at the outset, make it clear that there have been no serious efforts on the part of our scholars to present a systematic study of suicide from the ancient times to the modern days, in our country. Sociology as a science has now evinced a keen interest amongst students engaged in the study of social and sociological problems. Efforts are now being made to study the subject in all its branches. In Western countries, however, much progress has been made in this field. Scholars like Emile Durkheim, Harry Elpert, Henry Morselli, Prof. E. Westermarck, C. Lombroso, E. B. Hoag and several others have made monumental contributions to this branch of learning. New problems are now being tackled by the new generation of scholars who are making positive contributions to this science. But unfortunately it has hitherto remained absolutely ignored by the oriental scholars in general and Indian sociologists in particular. They have betrayed colossal indifference to this otherwise interesting branch of study which undoubtedly deserves

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[1] For details, see the author's paper, "Suicide in Modern India" in *CPJ*, vol. ii, No. 3.

a better treatment and serious notice at their hands. This indifference has further been responsible for the paucity of material and dearth of adequate literature to throw light on the historicity of suicide and the relative problems in ancient, mediaeval and modern India.

Our source-material for this dissertation is almost the same as for the general political and cultural history of ancient, mediaeval and modern India. We have sundry references lying scattered over the pages of the vast ancient and mediaeval literature. A peep into it shows that the ancient lawgivers and the later digest-writers did not pay much attention to this important problem. While some of these authorities denounce this act of self-killing in strong words, others support it in an equally eloquent language on religious grounds. Such arguments for and against this practice make the confusion worse confounded. Moreover, our ancient authorities, excepting Kauṭilya and Parāśara and a few other Dharmaśāstrakāras, do not care to go into the root of this problem and as such they do not enlighten us on its different aspects.

Economic and social aspects of this problem have been altogether ignored, only religious aspect dwelt upon, at length. It was only in the beginning of the twentieth century that a thorough inquiry into all aspects of this problem was started by Western researchers who have now, through their ceaseless efforts and consistent labour, revealed the magnitude of this problem which, if not baffling, is undoubtedly staggering. This inquiry has further revealed that this problem is pregnant with enormous possibilities which, if fully tackled and explored, would yield startling results that would revolutionise our age-old concept of society and the various problems facing it. Viewed in this context, it can

safely be asserted that the problem of self-destruction, which is inseparable from the human existence, is one of the most intriguing problems that have been haunting and perplexing the human mind throughout the centuries. It is, therefore, gratifying to note that the various Governments of the world, through their liberal patronage, have encouraged their scholars to study this problem in all its aspects which exert a tremendous influence on the morale of the society and its very many complicated problems. Unfortunately for us, the Government of the country do not yet seem interested in this horrifying sociological problem which claims thousands of precious lives every year and poses a serious threat and challenge to the thinking minds as well as to the Government.

We may thus broadly arrange the different sources of our study under the following heads :

(i) Literary (mainly classical);
(ii) Archaeological;
(iii) Foreign accounts;
(iv) Accounts as detailed in East India Company records and contemporary newspapers and periodicals;
(v) Secondary works.

Literary accounts constitute our main source of information regarding the ancient and the mediaeval period. We have numerous references to suicide—religious and otherwise—in our classical literature. In the *Vedas*, the *Brāhmaṇas*, the *Upaniṣads*, the *Epics*, the *Dharmaśāstras* and the *Purāṇas*, the Buddhist and the Jaina texts, the *Arthaśāstra* of Kauṭilya and the Sanskrit works of the early and late mediaeval period we come across innumerable direct and indirect instances of

kings, princes, princesses, courtiers and commoners indulging in the horrible and cruel act of self-destruction either out of religious considerations or due to other irresistible factors.

The *Dharmaśāstras* dwell on this problem rather exhaustively and prescribe penances and punishments to those who act contrary to the *śāstric* injunctions. Apart from this, we have the enormous *Tīrtha*-literature (literature on pilgrimage) which curiously enough describes in detail suicide by intending persons at different places of pilgrimage and the varying importance and virtues attached to them. We have numerous treatises on *Tīrtha*, e.g., Lakṣmīdhara's *Tīrtha-vivecana-Kāṇḍa* (c. 1125 A.D.) of the *Kṛtya-Kalpataru*; Hemādri's *Tīrtha-Khaṇḍa*, (c. 1270 A.D.); Vācaspati Miśra's *Tīrtha-Cintāmaṇi* (c. 1460 A.D.); Raghunandana's *Tīrtha-tattva* or *Tīrtha-yātrā-vidhi-tattva* (c. 1530 A.D.); Rāmakṛṣṇa's *Tīrtha-ratnākara* or *Rāmaprasāda* (c. 1540 A.D.); Todor Mal's *Tīrtha-saukhya* (part of *Ṭoḍarānanda*, c. 1575 A.D.); Nanda Paṇḍita's *Tīrtha-Kalpalatā* (c. 1610 A.D.); Mitramiśra's *Tīrtha-Prakāśa* or *Vīramitrodaya* (c. 1620 A.D.); Siddhānta-Vāgīśa Bhaṭṭācārya's *Tīrtha-Kaumudī* (not later than 1600 A.D.); Vācaspati's *Tīrtha-Kalpalatā* and several other works,[1] which treat of the religious aspect of suicide in all its details including its merits and demerits.

All the world over, pilgrimages to sacred rivers, pools, mountains and to shrines at or near holy places have held a very powerful attraction not only for common people, but even for the mental and spiritual elect. In Indian belief suffering is inseparable from life. All human effort should, therefore, be directed to find an

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[1] For details, see *Tīrtha-vivecana-Kāṇḍam* of *Kṛtya-Kalpataru* by Lakṣmīdhara Bhaṭṭa (edited by K.V. Rangaswami Aiyangar), App. F, pp. 293-94.

escape from suffering. The final release comes only when re-birth ceases after *Karma*, which clings to one like his shadow, is burnt out. Man rises or falls in the scale of existence, and the ethos of life determines its destiny. The discipline of ordered ritual and ceremony helps to secure the mental tranquility and the purity of the heart which are pre-requisites of emancipation.[1] Neither sex, nor social condition, nor hereditary degradation springing from miscegenation, nor status in family or society, nor poverty will be a bar to the pilgrimage which destroys sin and opens the way to higher things and ultimate emancipation. In other words, "all sins of (all) men are destroyed at *tīrthas*."[2] Hence the attraction for the *tīrthas* and the birth of enormous *tīrtha*-literature which regulated the religious activities of the people in the past, and allures the simple folk even today.

Archaeological sources also give us some very interesting accounts of this widely prevalent practice. They furnish us with several historical instances occurring in early and late mediaeval periods. Several epigraphic records relate to the thrilling stories of kings and commoners who indulged in this awe-inspiring act of self-destruction. The Khairh plates,[3] the Khajurāho inscription,[4] the Śravaṇa Belgolā records and others record instances of suicides. Moreover, there are inscriptions which refer to the practice of *satī*. The Eran posthumous stone inscription of Goparāja, Nepal inscriptions of 705 A.D., Belataru inscription of Śaka 799 of Rājendracoladeva[5] and other such epigraphs scattered

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[1] *Ibid.*, Intro., XX-XXI.
[2] *Ibid.*, Intro., XXV.
[3] *EI*, XII, p. 211.
[4] *EI*, I, p. 140.
[5] *EI*, VI, 213; XX, 168; X, 39; XVI, 10 etc.

over the pages of the volumes of *Indian Antiquary* and *Epigraphia Indica* and other historical journals speak eloquently of the prevalence of this custom among the ruling clans and the general mass. Some of these inscriptions also refer to stone monuments of those, who put an end to their lives to secure release from the bond of this life; besides we have *satī*-memorials,[1] which are of course few in number.

The accounts left by foreign travellers and eye-witnesses vouchsafe light when light from other sources fails. The Greek historians (Strabo, Justin, Diodorus and others) who accompanied Alexander on his invasion of India, have given interesting accounts of suicides in general and the practice of *satī* in particular in their works. It is from these records that we know that *satī* was practised in India among the Cathaei tribe in the Punjab as early as the 4th century B.C. Moreover, the accounts of Bernier,[2] Manucci[3] and other European travellers have left innumerable eye-witness accounts of the *satī* in the 16th-19th centuries A.D. Colonel Todd's *Annals of Rajasthan* and other works on Rajput history are yet another important source of our information regarding the institution of *Jauhar*—the undying eternal glory and pride of the Rajput warriors of the mediaeval period. These accounts are helpful to us in constructing the history of this period.

Then, we have the East India Company records and also the accounts as detailed in contemporary newspapers and periodicals from time to time since the 18th century onward. The company records often

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[1] cf. Sati-memorial stones in *JBORS*, XXIII, pt. iv.
[2] *Travels*, 304-15.
[3] *Storia do Mogor*, trans. by W. Irvine, vols. i-ii.

give us exhaustive account of the custom of *satī* as practised in Dacca, Murshidabad, Patna, Benares, Bareilly and in interior Calcutta which figured most prominently in this field. The contemporary newspapers such as the *Calcutta Journal* of the 19th century; *Samācāra-Candrikā*, a Bengali journal of the same period; *Saṁvāda patre se Kālera Kathā* (a collection of news-items, in three volumes, in Bengali which appeared in different contemporary newspapers and periodicals) and other periodicals of the time give us tables of statistics showing average cases of *satī* which we have already reproduced elsewhere in this work. These records, though they do not give us any systematic account of the period, nevertheless unmistakably reflect the dominant trend in the society.

Lastly, we have some secondary works in which we get a few references here and there. As there is no work on suicide, these stray references are undoubtedly of great help. Scholars such as Thomson (on *Suttee*); Sharda Prasad (on *Satī*); Verrier Elwin (his brilliant works on the aboriginal tribes of India such as *Maria*; *Murder and Suicide* etc.); John Malcolm (*Memoirs* etc.); William Crooke (*Religion and Folklore of Northern India* etc.); Dalton (*Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*); Westermarck (*Origin and Development of Moral Ideas* in 2 volumes); P. V. Kane (*History of Dharmaśāstra*) etc. have referred to the different aspects of this problem, which indeed greatly emboldened us, in spite of the acute pauctiy of materials and the very many odds, to undertake the present work.

## CHAPTER II

# CAUSES AND INFLUENCES

It is very difficult to find out a particular term signifying the act of self-destruction in ancient times. Classical writers often describe such acts as *ātmaghātaka*, along with murder and other crimes, and lay down various punishments in this connection. Our ancient works are replete with such pieces of evidence, and their close study and scrutiny would clearly show that the motives which led a man to take away his life were more or less the same as they are today.

There is also an abundant number of pre-disposing causes which give no support to the unusual scepticism, and are dependent upon a morbid organisation, either congenital or acquired — heredity, mental alienation, pellagra, delirium, drunkenness, hypochondria, physical disease etc. Besides, the impulsive passions—love, jealousy, ambition, shame, religious or political fanaticism, the fear of punishment etc.—have been a predominant factor of this social aspect. It is true, as the modern sociologists like Durkheim, Harry Elpert, Henry Morselli and others have established, that the success of attempts at suicide often depends upon independent individual circumstances, and all these reveal the psychological propensity of the man for self-destruction.

What are the basic influences that have been operating all through the centuries on the minds of the people goading them on to self-destruction ? According to

modern psychologists[1] they are mainly (i) cosmic or natural influences, (ii) ethnic or social (demographic) influences, (iii) social influences, (iv) individual biological influences and (v) individual psychological influences (determining motives). In other words, they can be distinguished as follows : (a) the factors belonging to the social realm; religion, marital status, family organisation, mode of life (whether rural or urban), mode of occupation (whether military or civilian) and (b) those that are as such non-social, and among the latter we may further differentiate : (i) the physical factors (seasons, temperature), (ii) the biological factors (sex, race, age) and (iii) the psychological factors (mental disease).

Kauṭilya and other Dharmaśāstrakāras (law-givers) hold more or less the same view. According to the former, all kinds of sudden death centre round one or the other of the following causes :

"Offence to women, or kinsmen, claiming inheritance, professional competition, hatred against rivals, commerce, guilds, and any one of the legal disputes is the cause of anger, and anger is the cause of death."[2]

Kauṭilya, however, condemns *ātmaghātaka* on secular and religious grounds[3]. Parāśara[4] also describes the fate which a man or woman comes by after having committed suicide by hanging, *either out of inordinate pride, incurable love, or excessive fright or anger.*

Religious celibacy is also enjoined and commended

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[1] For details, see Durkheim, *Le Suicide*, pp. 1 ff; Henry Morselli, *Suicide*, pp. 2 ff; C.Lombroso, *Crime : Its causes and Remedies*, pp. 1 ff; Hoag, *Crime, Abnormal Mind and the Law*, pp. 1 ff, etc.

[2] *Arthaśāstra*, IV. 7.

[3] *Ibid.*, IV. 7; Also see *Rājadharma Kāṇḍam* of the *Kṛtyakalpataru*, edited by K. V. Rangaswami Aiyangar, pp. 186-87.

[4] *Parāśara-smṛti*, IV. 1-2.

as a means of self-mortification supposed to appease an angry God, or with a view to raising the spiritual nature of man by suppressing one of the strongest of all sensual appetites. Thus, we find in various religions celibacy side by side with other ascetic observances practised for similar purposes. A very important cause of religious celibacy has been the wide-spread idea that sexual intercourse is defiling and in certain circumstances a mysterious cause of evil. This idea is typical of religious observances among the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Hebrews, the Indians, the Christians, the Muslims and the other ancient races.

The difference between the ancient Hindu and the modern outlook may clearly be seen in the attitude to death and suffering. The philosophy of *Saṁsāra* and *Karma* and the assumption that these doctrines have their roots in a belief in pre-destination and the denial of human volition are further responsible for the detached outlook of life.[1] It is because man is the architect of his own fortune, master of his destiny that suicides in the name of religion to secure release from the fetters of sufferings that beset this life, were acceptable as means of grace, a sure path of *nirvāṇa*. We have thoroughly dealt with this important aspect of suicide in the following chapter.

A very powerful factor that disturbs the peace and health of our mind is conflict. A number of strong desires, often unfulfilled, result in a tug-of-war amongst the various impulses, each demanding immediate satisfaction. Suppressed, and being denied direct expression, they come out indirectly in the form of "complexes" which are dangerous for the stability of our

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[1] K. V. Rangaswami Aiyangar, *op. cit.*, preface, vii.

mind. Most suicides attributed to love-affairs are the outcome of such impulses. Besides these, there are "mastery impulse", "masochistic nature" and other such causes that psychologists ascribe to this and other crimes.[1]

Though there are no direct references to causes, excepting the religious ones, leading to suicides, in ancient Indian literature, we can, on the authority of Kauṭilya and other law-givers, referred to above, safely assert that social and other causes were considerably the same as nowadays. It is true that society has undergone tremendous changes, but man, the architect of society, has not changed a bit, in spite of his centuries-old progress and advance, so far as his instincts, superstitious beliefs, sexual impulses, and above all, the ferocious tiger in him are concerned. Self-destruction was practised then, suicides are indulged in now: the only difference lies in number.[2]

A comparative study in the causes of suicides in mediaeval and modern India would clearly show that they are invariably the same as in ancient times though with marked variations now and then. Social, religious and environmental notions die hard. Deep-rooted religious convictions, fast-steeped social traditions, and long-cherished superstitions resist any attack on their jurisdiction, with all their fury and anguish, though unconsciously. Man by nature is averse to any direct changes, however beneficial to him. Moreover, the ancient schools of thought are always there as a living check, defying new philosophies of life to enter into their fold. There has, therefore,

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[1] See the author's paper, "Suicide in Ancient India" in *CPJ*, vol. ii, No. 1, pp. 1-20.

[2] *Ibid.*

been a continuous clash between the opposing forces of ideas. In this struggle for domination vigorous and forceful new ideas may win sometimes, but the old ones are never eliminated. They seek, as a matter of fact, in the hearts of the majority of men looking for an opportune moment to strike, and strike furiously, whenever the opportunity presents by itself. This has always happened in the past : this will always happen in the future. Legislations are, to say the least, always ineffective to have their final say in the matter.[1]

The analysis of these causes makes us bold to assert that the factors operating have been the same all the world over, be it in India, or Europe, or America or any other country. It is true that new problems have brought in new factors in a greater magnitude, but it is also true that these problems have always been there, though in a lesser degree, and in a somewhat different form.[2] Modern man's problems are, indeed, not new, and are as old as his existence. They, however, appear to have assumed a new look in the new changed circumstances. Economic conditions and group attitudes have always influenced the amount of suicides, and cultural patterns have always acted as inhibiting or encouraging forces. But, the personal factors leading a man to self-destruction have been no less important underlying factors all through the ages.

Suicide has rightly been deemed as "a reaction to problems that apparently cannot be solved in any other way : a final response which a human being makes to inner emotional distress."[3] There are as many varied

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[1] cf., the author's paper, "Suicide in Mediaeval India" in *CPJ*, vol. ii, No. 2, pp. 1-20.

[2] cf., the author's paper, "Suicide in Modern India" in *CPJ*, vol. ii, No. 3, pp. 1-34.

[3] Quoted, *Ibid.*, vol. ii, No. 3, p. 6.

motives behind it as the number of people seeking this method of escape. Various kinds of hardships, such as unemployment, hunger, poverty and other deprivations; mental abnormality, physical pain, ill health, deformity etc. are often responsible for inducing thoughts of suicide. The loss of honour, position, freedom or love as well as failure with its accompanying feeling of inadequacy, disgrace, sex-difficulties and tangled personal relationships make a man lose all interest in life, and death seems to him necessary as an escape. But, "ordinarily no one of them alone would drive a person to suicide unless he were already harassed by a serious emotional conflict. Usually external events merely intensify latent disturbances and provide the immediate provocation in any case."[1]

The following case is a unique instance of this serious emotional conflict and immediate provocation:

"Courmayeur, July 10—Many Italian daily newspapers have received letters from their readers demanding internment of a mystic sect which claimed recently that the world would come to an end on July 14...

"The recent suicide of a young and mentally backward Italian worker was attributed to the sect's 'end of the world' prophecy.

"Pietro Bauce, 19 of San Fermo Della Battaglia, hanged himself in the attic of his home after spending two nights outdoors, the first near a cross at Mount San Fermo and the second in a woods.

"In a suicide-note the youth said, he preferred to hang himself rather than die 'miserably' on July 14 under the conditions predicted by the mystics of Courmayeur."[2]

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[1] Quoted, *Ibid.*
[2] *The Searchlight*, Patna, July 11, 1960.

Thus, without uncovering the basic causes of psychic conflict it is indeed very difficult to understand suicide. Sociologists have put forward numerous explanations in their suicide-notes, but they are any thing but reliable, as they are "rationalisations covering up powerful impulses." Abnormal grief accruing from the loss of a loved one, mutual jealousy, mental difficulties, infidelity, desertion, family-discord, pride, remorse and shame are all symptoms of difficulty in personal adjustment. The forces of fear and anxiety, feelings of inferiority, hatred, aggressiveness, revenge, guilt and other mental disorders are such that they prevent people from attaining *emotional maturity*. This emotional immaturity has probably been the most powerful factor compelling a man to choose suicide as the only solution to seemingly insurmountable difficulties. Building up each personality through self-discipline to enable it or to adapt itself readily to life's demands and accept the exigencies of fortune with equanimity is, according to modern psycho-analysts, the only way to arrest this abnormal tendency.

Suicide is in the opinion of competent medical authorities "a symptom of disease of the brain" in the majority of cases. But at the same time they also admit that sane persons may and do commit suicide. According to them, the brain-constitution of some persons is such that, when they are under the immediate influence of alcohol, they always become suicidal. The next kind of case, in which suicide is attempted is one "on the borderland of disease."[1] It is the man "intellectually sound and not emotionally depressed who simply loses for the time being his normal love of life, ceases to have

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[1] See the author's paper in *CPJ*, vol. ii, No. 3, pp. 1 ff.

any fear of death, suffers from the *taedium vitae* of the ancients, and for trivial causes, or for no outward cause at all, attempts his life."[1] Such men are often in Hamlet's frame of mind : *To be or not to be* : *that is the question.* A man in this state cannot always be reckoned insane, and yet he is in an abnormal state of brain and mind. "The mass of suicides are committed or attempted by persons either insane, or on the verge of insanity."[2] It is because of this important factor that the policies of life-insurance are usually so framed as to be void if the insured dies by his own act, whether he is of sound mind or not.

The forms of insanity betraying suicidal trends are (i) melancholia and (ii) alcoholic insanity. Four-fifths of all patients suffering from melancholia have suicidal feelings and two-fifths of them make actual attempts on their life.

Lunacy not infrequently involves such complete loss of the instinct of self-preservation that the patient, even where analgesia is not present, will mutilate or kill himself, apparently without any idea of what he is doing. So in *dementia proecox* 'self-respect, modesty and the instinct of self-preservation are quite absent'; and the result is various—absurd, criminal, or indecent acts, including suicide for a trivial reason or none at all. Again, *dementia paralytica*, or chronic periencephalitis, although like many forms of mental diseases, generally produces intense and unreasoning attachment to life, often involves accesses of wild, self-directed fury, such as that in which Guy de Maupassant, the world-famous short story-writer, tried to kill himself. But the most typical

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[1] *Ibid.*
[2] *Ibid.*

examples are those of melancholia of which Tanzi gives us an admirably lucid account :

"In some cases of melancholia scenes of the most horrible and sanguinary nature, which are represented to the patient's mind as simple possibilities, and repeated as favourite images on account of their hideousness, become transformed into a *motor obsession*. The obsession, meeting with but slight resistance in an exhausted and abulic brain (*i.e.*, one almost if not quite deprived of will-power), becomes so imperative as to drive the patient inexorably to the commission of acts corresponding to it, such as.....suicide in its most horrible form."[1]

Now, as a normal subject may be tempted by the depression arising out of a real misfortune to take his own life, so a melancholiac suffering from this intense and abnormal feeling of anxious misery is not infrequently driven in a quasi-normal way to commit suicide. Objectively he has no sufficient motive, but subjectively his hopeless depression, the morbid nature of which he is unable to realise, presents itself as a good reason for wishing to be dead and fulfilling his wish.[2]

This kind of suicide is more common among the intellectuals or the educated than the illiterate classes of which living historic examples were furnished by the world-famous poet Prof. Naguchi of Japan; John Massaryck, the late foreign-minister of Czechoslovakia; Adolf Hitler, the great Dictator and his renowned colleague Goebbles of undivided Germany; and Justice Panckridge of Calcutta High Court (1942). A recent

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[1] Tanzi, *A Text-book of Mental Diseases*, pp. 640-41 and also 231, 513, 514, 519, etc.

[2] *Ibid.*, 514; also see Mercier, *Sanity and Insanity* (2nd ed.), pp. 350-51 etc.

instance of such feat, we have, in our country in the death of Prof. K. N. Bahl, former head of the Geology Department of Lucknow University and ex-Vice-Chancellor of Patna University, who was found hanging with a noose round his neck at his Lucknow residence. According to his relatives, the deceased suffered from a *nervous break-down* sometime back and was generally found *mentally depressed*. He was 65.[1]

We have yet another instance of such a suicidal feat *born of mental depression and unsound mind*:

"Birmingham, May 7—A 23-year-old Indian remanded on a charge of attempted suicide, hanged himself last Sunday in a cell by means of a belt and length of mail-bag twine, an inquest here was told today.

"Swaran Singh, described by a prison-hospital-officer as a *very timid, quiet, pathetic type of man who seemed in a depressed condition*, had been on remand from Coventry on a charge of trying to cut his throat.

"The Chief prison-medical-officer said that Singh was certifiable as of *unsound mind*.

"The Jury returned a verdict of *suicide while of unsound mind*."[2]

Such deaths are always due to melancholia, and it is a risk that should be considered and provided against every case such as this disease.

The tendency to suicide is not seldom hereditary. Suicide may carefully be contrived or planned for months, or it may be done through a *momentary morbid impulse*. Misunderstanding or jealousy or a joke often plays a great part in accelerating this dangerous "momen-

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[1] *The Statesman*, Calcutta, April, 22, 1954.
[2] *The Statesman*, Calcutta, May 8, 1954.

tary morbid impulse." According to Chevers,[1] most common causes of suicide in India are jealousy, family-discord, destitution, and physical suffering. He further states that jealousy with all its bitterness, is the cause of a large number of female suicides, as is amply demonstrated in the follcwing case :

"Aleppo, May 15—Mrs. Abdul Ghani Osman killed herself here when her husband for a joke left a note to say, he was going off with another woman. Mr. Osman left the note on the breakfast-table before he hurried off to work inviting his wife to come along later to a place he named to meet the other woman. Actually he intended meeting her there and sharing the joke—but she did not turn up. She drank a bottle of poison."[2]

H. N. Bakshi[3] has very neatly and precisely summarised various aspects of suicide under their different heads—(i) Age, (ii) Sex and (iii) Cause.

As regards age, suicide, according to him, is more common among adults, usually between the ages of 16 and 50. It is very rare among children and people above 50 years. But, this age-group is not always reliable, and such cases do often occur as we shall presently show in the following pages.

Suicide, due to sex, is said to be more common among females than males. But our day-to-day experience shows it otherwise. As a matter of fact, these days suicide among males is much more frequent than among females.

But, in certain parts of India, *i.e.*, Saurashtra, the

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[1] Chevers, *Manual of Medical Jurisprudence for India*, pp. 396 ff.
[2] *The Amrit Bazar Patrika*, Calcutta, May 16, 1954.
[3] *Synopsis of Medical Jurisprudence*, pp. 200 ff.

incidence of suicide is much more among females than the males. The following two news-items culled from the daily newspapers speak for themselves :

(1) "Satyamurthinagar, Jan. 22—There were 167 cases of suicides by women in the State of Saurashtra during the period between March and June, 1954. The State Government had arrangements for the collection of statistics of such suicides and they revealed that there was one case of suicide every day. Such suicides were not due to economic backwardness of women, but they were due certainly to the absence of elementary social conditions for women.

"This observation was made by the Congress President, Shri Dhebar, while addressing the women's section of the A.I.C.C. and the P.C.Cs.

"He said that for every case of suicide there were 180 cases of near-suicides by women who had, however, not the guts to face death or they desisted from committing suicide due to religious sentiments.

"Shri Dhebar said that while he was the Chief-Minister of Saurashtra, he had arranged statistics to be collected and the revelations were very shocking."[1]

(2) "Rajkot, Feb. 1—The large number of suicide cases among women in Saurashtra is causing concern to the Government.

"In the first six months of 1955 there were 139 such cases.

"The Government have set up a committee of seven members of which the Director of Child Rehabilitation is the Convener to enquire into the cause of this high incidence among women and to find ways and means to eradicate this social evil."[2]

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[1] *The Amrit Bazar Patrika*, Calcutta, Jan. 23, 1955.
[2] *The Indian Nation*, Feb. 3 (Dak Edition), Patna, 1956.

It would not be out of place to mention here that Mr. Dhebar was probably the only Chief Minister in India who was interested in collecting the statistics of the incidence of suicide and the Government of Saurashtra is probably the only State Government in India who showed concern at the increasing rate of suicide and instituted a high-powered Committee to look into the causes of this social malady. But, we do not yet know whether the report of this Committee has been submitted and published. None the less, the report, when published, would be a very interesting document and would prove an eye-opener to those who do not treat of this problem as seriously as it ought to be.

Kerala, which is probably the most educated State in India, tops the list in this field. There were 1,959 suicides in Kerala between February 22, 1960 and September 30, 1961, according to Mr. P.T. Chako, the State Home Minister who gave this figure in the Assembly during the question-hour on November 16.[1]

Apart from Bengal, Bihar is yet another state in post-independence India where in spite of a terrible increase in the number of suicides, the authorities have shown no concern so far. The trend of suicide among the common people these days is gradually assuming a very dangerous proportion which, if not checked in time, will surely take the form of an epidemic. We reproduce below a few news-items published in one of the local dailies of the same date :

"Patna, June 21—How the tendency towards suicide among the people is fast on the increase, is clearly evident from the following news-items :

(i) "It is reported from Katihar that a young

[1] *The Searchlight*, Patna, Nov. 17, 1961.

Bengali committed suicide by hanging in Binodpur Muhalla on Thursday. The cause of the suicide is said to be his acute poverty....."[1]

(ii) "It is reported from Ratanpura (Darbhanga) that a 25-year-old young man committed suicide by throwing himself down the 322 Down passenger train between the Thalwara and Hayaghat Railway Station, a few days ago.....The cause of the suicide is unknown."[2]

(iii) "Warisaliganj (Gaya), June 21—A woman of a Koiri family of village Ballopur under the local P. S. attempted to commit suicide by poison, after having poisoned her 12-year-old son, 5-year-old daughter and 8-month-old son. This morning when other members of the family found them lying unconscious, they rushed them to the local Government Hospital. The infant died whereas other patients are still lying in an unconscious state.....The cause of this tragic incident is said to be the domestic quarrel....."[3]

(iv) "Parwaha (Purnea), June 21—It is learnt from the Police-sources that a 25-year-old youngman, Tetar Mahto of village Jhirua under the Farwisganj P. S. committed suicide the other day by hanging from a mango tree.....The dead body has been sent to Araria for post-mortem....."[4]

(v) "Bhagalpur, June 21—It is reported that a 45-year-old Muslim committed suicide by lying down on the railway-track near the Bhagalpur Railway Station in the afternoon, when 338 Down Gaya-Sealdah passen-

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[1] *Aryavarta* (Hindi Daily), June 23 (Dak Edition), Patna, 1960.
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] *Ibid.*
[4] *Ibid.*

ger was passing.....Investigations are going on, but the identity of the person concerned has not been established yet."[1]

(vi) "Chapra, June 21—The other day a married young girl of a local clerk, committed suicide by pouring kerosene oil over her body and setting fire to it. She was rushed to the Sadar Hospital where she died only after a few hours.

"Near the Police-line a young man was also found seriously wounded and he died in the Hospital the other day. Police-investigations are going on."[2]

The above news-items, though few in number, are a severe stricture on the horrible state of affairs prevalent in the state of Bihar and they also speak of the colossal indifference and negligence on the part of the authorities concerned to seriously think over and check this growing menace.

The causes thus are varied. These may be arranged under the following heads :

### (*i*) Domestic Troubles and Worries

These are very common causes of suicides now-a-days as in (a) quarrel between the wife and the husband or his relatives; (b) dispute between different members of the same family; (c) chastisement by parents or guardians.

After chastisement or some other violence, children are known to have committed suicide by hanging, from shame or grief. One such case occurred in Jubbulpore, where a Muslim lad, aged 12, quarrelled with his brother one night, and committed suicide by hanging from the ceiling of his house the next day.[3] We have yet another

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[1] *Ibid.*
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] *The Hindusthan Times*, New Delhi, Jan. 8, 1933.

instance of such suicide. In his *Annual Report for the year* 1939, the Chemical Engineer, Madras, reported a case in which a girl aged ten years, committed suicide by hanging; and (d) fear of retribution.

How these domestic troubles and quarrels are daily taking a heavy toll of lives can easily be judged from the following few instances :

(1) "Allahabad, June 11—It is learnt from a reliable source that a young married Brahmin girl committed suicide by taking copper-sulphate (blue vitriol) in the Bisoli Gate Arch (in Chandosi). She was married only two years back, but not being on good terms with her husband, she stayed mostly in her parent's house. It is said that she took this step only to relieve herself of this unhappy domestic life."[1]

(2) "Warsaliganj (Gaya), June 18—It is reported that a few days ago a young girl of a Bhumihar Brahmin family with her newly-born infant committed suicide by throwing herself down a running train, along with her baby, at about 4 A.M. in the morning, about six miles away from the Baghiwardih Railway Station. She belonged to village Gopalpur. Serious domestic quarrel is said to be the cause of her death."[2]

"It is said that the very next day a young man committed suicide by falling down a running train in the afternoon. Domestic trouble is said to be the cause of this suicide."[3]

"The third case took place on the third day when near the Gosepur halt, between the Warsaliganj and Kashichak Railway Station, a 60-year-old woman attempted to commit suicide by jumping down a running

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[1] *Amrita Patrika* (Hindi), Allahabad, June 12, 1954.
[2] *Aryavarta* (Hindi), Patna, June 21 (Dak Edition), 1960; also see *Ibid.*, June 23, 1960.
[3] *Ibid.*, June 23, 1960.

goods-train, but she was thrown off by the engine. She, however, lost her one leg and received serious injuries on other parts of her body. She was sent to the Nawada Railway Station."[1]

"Bihia, (Shahabad), June, 23—It is said that a young man committed suicide by throwing himself down a running train. People believe that he resorted to this method due to some trouble."[2]

"From another report from Maunpur it is learnt that the Police arrested a person while attempting to commit suicide as he was fed up with the quarrels between his two wives."[3]

"Vaisali (Muzaffarpur), June 23—A few days ago a woman of Rahimpur village committed suicide due to a quarrel with her mother-in-law."[4]

(3) "Lucknow, June, 11—According to the Police-statistics 50 per cent of the suicides committed in the city are due to domestic disputes and quarrels. From the figures available for the first four months of the last three years it appears that altogether 29 suicides were committed during this period, of which 14 were due to domestic disputes. In the first five months of 1952 eight cases of suicide were reported, 4 being due to domestic troubles. During the same period of 1953, 10 cases occurred, of which 6 were again the victims of domestic quarrels. Till the 31st of May of the current year (*i.e.*, 1954) nine instances were reported, four being due to domestic troubles. Of these the figures for females are much higher than those for males.

"The next cause is unemployment and economic distress. In 1952, 1953 and 1954 (till May 31), three,

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[1] *Ibid.*
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] *Ibid.*
[4] *Ibid.*

one and three cases of suicide were reported respectively, due to economic reasons. In the first five months of 1952, 1953 and 1954 (till May 31), one, two and one suicides were respectively committed due to prolonged illness. Last year (1953) three persons were arrested while attempting to commit suicide."[1]

(4) "New Delhi, Nov. 15—The suicide of Mr. Rajeshwar Chatterjee, a junior Godown Keeper in the department of food, Calcutta, in September last, while under suspension in connection with his participation in the Central Government employees' strike figured in the Lok Sabha at question-time today.

"There was a mild uproar from the opposition benches when Mr. Thomas (Deputy Food Minister) said that according to Police reports, Mr. Chatterjee committed suicide because he was generally depressed on account of the failure of the Central Government employees' strike."[2]

(5) "Patna, May 21—Yesterday, in the Bihar legislative Council, in a written reply to a question by Sri Jagadish Sharma, it was stated that 1533 males and 1400 females committed suicide between the year 1950 and 1955.

"The causes of these suicides were secret love affairs, domestic quarrels, prolonged illness, madness or insanity, unemployment, fear of punishment, poverty etc."[3]

The above reply given on behalf of the Government of Bihar makes indeed a very interesting study. Relying on these figures supplied by the Government, though official figures are more than often misleading

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[1] *Vishwamitra* (Hindi), Calcutta, June 12, 1954.
[2] *The Searchlight*, Nov. 16, 1960.
[3] *Sanmarg* (Hindi), Calcutta, May 28, 1956.

and vague and, therefore, unreliable, we can safely imagine the horrible speed at which the crime is now taking place in Bihar. The figures clearly show that about 500 persons are taking their lives annually in only one State of India and if all the figures for all the States are obtained, it would no doubt be a horrifying and nerveracking study. In spite of this magnitude, the tragedy of tragedies is that our Government practically ignore this ferocious monster in a none-too-serious way. Another interesting feature of the problem is that the percentage for males is almost the same as that for the females.

### (*ii*) Remorse or Shame

Remorse or shame may be caused due to (*a*) illegitimate relationship, especially among Hindu widows and unmarried girls; (*b*) unrestrained passion; (*c*) jealousy (the example of which has already been quoted above); (*d*) debauchery and (*e*) venereal diseases—all these often make a man lose interest in life and indulge in self-destruction.

### (*iii*) Extreme Grief and Sad News

These are (*a*) death of the nearest and dearest ones; (*b*) loss of money or property; (*c*) failure in examination, which very often induces a suicidal feeling generally in emotionally immature school and college students and (*d*) disappointment in love—a very common factor responsible for suicides among young boys and girls since time immemorial. The following instance speaks of how students, after their failure in examination, commit suicide on the spur of the moment which has become very common in India these days :

"Jubbulpore, June 20—A student of the local school committed suicide on June 17 after taking

opium, on hearing the news of his failure in the Matriculation examination for the third time. The name of the student was Ram Kumar Vyohar who had appeared from the Hitkarini High School, Jubbulpore. When he did not find his name in the list of the successful candidates, he was so aggrieved that he took opium. He was rushed to the Victoria Hospital, where in spite of the best efforts of the doctors, he could not be saved."[1]

We have yet another instance of such suicides which are taking extraordinary shapes in Uttara Pradesh (U.P.) The number is fast on the increase and it has become a matter of grave concern to the authorities concerned who are now seriously thinking of devising some ways and means to arrest this abnormal tendency among a section of young students.

"Meerut, June 20—It is reported that Police constables in a large number have been posted along the Delhi-Meerut Railway line in ordinary civilian dress to arrest the horrible increase in number of suicides which have been occurring in the city for the last few months.

"It is further reported that four cases of suicides have taken place in the last two weeks. These cases are so heart-rending that the authorities have now been compelled to take precaution against the occurrence of such incidents. It is said that a student committed suicide by throwing himself down a running train on his failure in the examination, whereas another student took opium or poison on the same account. For the last few months there has been a fast growing tendency among the unsuccessful young students towards self-

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[1] *Sanmarg* (Hindi), Calcutta, June 21, 1954.

destruction."[1]

### (*iv*) Religious Fanaticism

Religious fanaticism has been one of the most significant causes of suicides practised in the name of religion since time immemorial. Rich and poor, kings and commoners, destitutes and beggars have all alike been victims of this vagary which defies all logic and reasoning. Very crude methods have been employed by these "devotees" to take their precious lives. They are generally—(*a*) throwing oneself under the wheels of the car of Jagannātha; (*b*) drowning oneself in the river Gaṇgā and (*c*) burning of Hindu widows on the funeral pyres of their dead husbands. We have elaborately dealt with this aspect of suicide[2] in the following chapter.

### (*v*) Poverty or Economic Reasons

Poverty or stringent economic condition is probably the most powerful factor responsible for thousands of suicides. This monster of poverty has been devouring innumerable precious lives day in and day out, unabated and unchecked. The pang of hunger drives a man to the shameful status of an utter destitute, and destitutes know no morals. A hungry soul has no charm for life and often resorts to the extreme step of destroying his own self to get rid of his worries and destitution.

This may be summarised as (*a*) inability to obtain food or maintain family—a most powerful factor leading to suicides among the middle class and the lower middle class people; and (*b*) dowry system. Unmarried Hindu girls occasionally resort to suicide to relieve their parents

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[1] *Ibid.*, June 21, 1954.
[2] *Supra*, Chap. III —Religious Suicide.

of the heavy expenses to be incurred on account of their marriage, as is amply illustrated in the following cases :

"Recently a dead body of a young girl from rural area was brought to Kanpur for post-mortem. The girl was a graduate. It is said, she was the daughter of a village teacher who earned seventy rupees as his monthly salary. To find a suitable match for his graduate-daughter the poor teacher—father—had somehow or other managed to save four thousand rupees out of his meagre income. In spite of it, he could not find a suitable groom for his daughter. The girl was very much struck with grief over her poor father's worries and plight. To relieve her parents of this heavy burden she sprinkled kerosene oil over her body, set fire to it and burned to death."[1]

We have yet another instance in the following case:

"Coimbatore, June 12—M. V. Selionka, a 56-year-old Russian engineer was found dead near the Railway track between Peelamedu and Singanallur stations, a few miles from here, last night.

"M. Selionka, who had been employed as an engineer in a local firm for about five years was, it is stated, *out of job*.

"An inquest by the Railway police here this evening gave the verdict as death due to suicide."[2]

The recent case of suicide by Dr. M.T. Joseph, the promising young Indian scientist, in New Delhi (1960), out of frustration resulting from his wretched economic condition due to gross negligence and utter unsympathetic treatment of his superior officials, is a most glaring instance of this kind of suicide which stunned the whole nation and pricked the otherwise dead con-

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[1] *Tarun*, (Hindi weekly), Calcutta, May 15, 1954.
[2] *The Statesman*, Calcutta, June 14, 1954.

science of the National Government to realise the grave implications of such deaths in the larger interests of the nation. Furthermore the suicide of Dr. D. Partha-sarathy, a very promising scientist, which almost followed the pattern of the suicide of Dr. M. T. Joseph, highlights the intense frustration and despondency under which intellectuals of our country have to work and live. One of the three Doctors in India on Animal Nutrition, this brilliant scientist (of Jabalpur), had to run from pillar to post looking for jobs which he was denied due to the partisan attitude of the bureaucratic Governmental officials, and finally he fell a tragic victim to the prevailing insecurity, injustice and inhumanity.[1]

### (*vi*) Famine and Scarcity

Frequent famines and scarcities in our country from the earliest times down to the modern period have claimed millions of people as their victims. The scenes of such natural calamities have been so horrible as to beggar description. India may rightly be termed as a land of floods and famines which have become a part and parcel of the lives of the people.[2] Besides starvation-deaths, (*a*) inability to bear the pangs of hunger and (*b*) sight of children suffering from want of food are such heart-rending scenes that drive helpless parents to put an end to their lives to get rid of the unbearable sight. Such deaths are certainly an undying slur on the fair name of a country which allows its destitute and helpless inhabitants to resort to this inglorious and shameful act. In this connection the great famine of 1769 which wiped out one-third of the popula-

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[1] For a detailed account, see *Blitz* (English weekly), Bombay, Sept. 17, 1960, p. 7.

[2] For a detailed account of scarcities and famines, see R.C. Dutt, *Famines in India*.

tion of the then Bengal Presidency, and the unprecedented Bengal Famine of 1943 deserve special mention. The great Bengal Famine of 1943, however, was the most heinous crime ever perpetrated by men on the hapless humanity in the whole history of mankind. It was, in a sense, a case of forced mass-suicide, when millions of people were compelled to starve to death on the streets of Calcutta like worms and insects from want of food and other amenities of life. Words are too poor to paint the picture of this appalling, staggering and horrible acts committed to serve the political interest of the rulers as well as some political leaders and capitalists of the time. Suicides and epidemics followed starvation-deaths of which we have no parallel in the history of the world.

### (*vii*) Incurable and Painful Diseases

Incurable and painful diseases such as cancer, paralysis, stricture of urethra, insomnia and other diseases often compel frustrated patients to commit suicide to be relieved of the perpetual pain. Old men suffering from chronic diseases often try to end their lives as is clear from the following instance :

"Katani (Bihar)—People here were astonished to hear 'Ram, Ram' uttered by an old man from inside a 60 ft.-deep well. On looking down they found a familiar face of a sixty-year-old man of the village. He was soon brought out. The old man said that he had jumped down the well to commit suicide, as he was fed up with his old age and disease. But as there was only 3 ft. deep water in the well, he remained practically unhurt."[1]

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[1] *Lokamanya* (Hindi), Calcutta, June 16, 1954.

### (*viii*) Revenge

In ancient and mediaeval times people, generally Brāhmaṇas, committed suicide before the house of an enemy or sitting *dharanā* till death in order to take revenge on their enemies, as it was generally believed that his ghost would perpetually haunt, harass and prosecute the offenders. Till the beginning of the twentieth century this kind of suicide was most prevalent amongst a section of the Brāhmaṇas, but now it is rare. We have cited numerous instances of this kind of suicide in the following chapter.[1]

### (*ix*) Real or Imaginary Grievances

Political prisoners or leaders often out of real or imaginary grievances, take recourse to hunger-strike to get their grievances redressed.

The political movement in our country for several decades also made its definite contribution to its growth. Thousands of young men, at the call of Mahatma Gandhi, threw themselves up in the great, historic national struggle for freedom. So long as they were in the thick of the fight, life bore little meaning or significance to them. They sacrificed their everything, even their lives without any hesitation whatever. They resorted to *satyāgraha*, hunger-strike and died smilingly so that their beloved countrymen may live as an independent and proud people. Mahatma Gandhi taught that *satyāgraha* or hunger-strike was the only strong weapon which a disarmed and enslaved nation can beat its alien masters with. He justified his stand by himself resorting to hunger-strikes on numerous occasions as a protest against injustices done to his helpless countrymen by the alien rulers. The new weapon caught the fancy

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[1] *Supra*, Chap. III.

of the people at large, and the first historical victim to it was martyr Jatin Das, the great patriot and revolutionary leader of Bengal who fasted for 61 days in a British jail as a protest against ill-treatment meted out to his fellow-prisoners. But this novel method of achieving one's end in a non-violent way, as conceived by the Mahatma, is now being misused by his followers. Divested of all its past glory, halo of self-purification and spiritual greatness it has become a political weapon in the hands of party-leaders who try to make capital out of it in and out of season. The latest historical instance of this kind of self-destruction we have in the death of the South Indian leader, Potti Sriramulu who resorted to hunger-strike against the Congress Government of the country for the formation of a separate Andhra State, and consequently died after 51 days of continuous fasting. His example was later followed by several others who were, however, saved in time. All told, it must be conceded that this kind of political suicide has a definite religious tinge and is very much similar to the rite of *sallakhena* practised by the Jainas, discussed at length in the following chapter.

Since then *satyāgraha* has been practised by political and social leaders in some form or other to voice their grievances before the country and get them redressed. After independence, however, this practice has been gradually losing its force and popularity.

### (x) Insanity

Insane persons sometimes commit suicide without any rhyme or reason. We have, in the preceding pages, dwelt at length on the various aspects of insanity which results in unbalanced mind and thinking and loss of

the sense of right and wrong. We have cited several instances of this kind in the following chapter.

### (*xi*) Results of Partition

Lastly, we have to take into consideration the aftermath of the partition of India into India and Pakistan in 1947 which also gave great impetus to the already accumulating figures for suicide in India, especially in Bengal and the Punjab. Lakhs of desperate refugees, deprived of their home and hearth, migrated to different places, to eke out a meagre existence here and there. This wholesale and unprecedented dislocation told terribly upon their morale. Moreover, their womenfolk were subjected to beastly treatment, and unspeakable atrocities were committed on them. To escape from these, young girls in a very large number either committed suicide or professed the religion of the brute offenders. Most of the parents could not stand the ghastly sight of their helpless daughters being molested, insulted and humiliated, and put an end to their agonies by indulging in self-killing.

Suicide has thus claimed a big toll of these destitutes. It is very difficult to give accurate figures for such violent deaths, but the daily newspaper-reports, which then appeared all over the country do support our contention that the suicide-rates for this class of uprooted humanity are unimaginably higher than the average ones.

### (*xii*) Other Causes and Climatic Influences

Suicide may be committed, as is commonly done, from insane delusions; prolonged sleeplessness (which results in brain exhaustion and ultimately leads to suicidal feelings); state of unconsciousness which leaves no recollections afterwards, and the sight of a weapon,

or water or any such means of destroying life. The strong suicidal desire or feeling listens to no appeal to religious sentiments or the sense of duty or to social obligations.

Climatic influences, it is said, appear to be uniformly at work in most countries, and there have been many erroneous generalisations as to the effect of the weather on the suicide rate. According to the available statistics for suicides, in the United States of America, the suicide-rate is the highest in the spring; the rate rises from January through April, reaching a peak in May. Beginning with June through the summer, autumn and early winter suicides decrease until the lowest point is reached in December. Unfortunately in India no systematic study has been made to ascertain the causes, rate and number of suicides. The *Mortality Section* in the Government of India Census Reports is conspicuously silent on this issue. No mention has been made of suicide even, leave aside the date and statistics for such a common social phenomenon affecting thousands of people, whose traditions, religious practices and social attitudes are reflected in the suicide-rates.

### (*xiii*) Influence of The World-Wars : Unemployment

The two world wars have had considerable effect on the suicide-rates in the world. Complete records for the war-periods are not available. But "the figures relating to some of the belligerent countries such as England, United States, Australia, Germany, Italy, Japan etc., and non-belligerent countries such as Sweden and Switzerland show beyond any doubt of possibility the profound effect produced upon the suicide-rate by the world wars."[1] These wars have also completely and

[1] *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, xxi, p. 533.

emphatically contradicted the theory that nervous strain is one of the prime causes leading to self-destruction. On the other hand they have furnished the most weighty volume of indirect evidence that "lack of interest in life itself should be regarded as one of, if not, *the* most potent factor at work."[1]

In any case, the war-period is marked by a "notable decline" in the suicide-rate. The fall in the rate among men was greater than among women. Thus, while the fall in the case of men was one of 37 per cent, in that of women it was 10 per cent.[2]

India, though not a field of battle in the world-wars, felt its repercussions all the same. Though no figures are available, it can, however, be guessed on the basis of general data that the cases of suicides were definitely less in number during these periods, compared with the previous ones. War, while being fought, considerably solves the problem of poverty and unemployment by throwing open new avenues of income. Man during this period lives by excitement. The thrilling news of war always dominates his mind and impulses. But as soon as the war is over, defeated or victorious, a grim frustration overtakes his mind when he finds that the very ideal for which he lived and fought is not realised. There is then a chronic depression in the economic fields and all the war-time mirth disappears suddenly. This transition-period is very dangerous in that it shatters the morale of the people who resort to all sorts of criminal activities, and for them all the old values of morality and life are entirely changed. So far as this indirect influence is concerned, India was badly affected by the wars which gave criminal

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 533.
[2] For details see *Ibid.*, pp. 532-33.

activities a new lease of life. In spite of the fact that the country achieved independence in 1947 and that Five Year Plans have been put into operation by the National Government in all earnestness to remove poverty and unemployment and to raise the miserably low standard of the people after hundreds of years of slavery and semi-starvation condition, the monster of unemployment is more and more stalking the land and claiming innumerable victims every day. Thus frustration in the economic field and relative increase in unemployment has virtually killed the souls of millions, and suicide, especially among the educated classes, is fast on the increase. "If you do not want to commit suicide," aptly remarks one writer, "always have something to do."[1]

Frustration born of unemployment has very seriously affected the morale of the educated people who, despite their best education and efficiency, are finding it too difficult to get a suitable employment in their own home. Another great factor which is working at the root of this frustration, is the virus of casteism, nepotism and favouritism which has nothing to do with merit and integrity and which is responsible for the terrible deterioration in all walks of public life in this land. As a result of this horrible state of affairs, thousands of deserving young men have turned too cynic and pessimistic to struggle against these odds and have virtually ceased all interest in this 'wretched life.' It is these meritorious but frustrated young men who have taken to suicide on a large scale as the only commendable means to get rid of the worries resulting from poverty and humiliation. The following instance clearly speaks

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[1] Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy*, p. 200; Tallentyre, p. 93.

of this awful state of affairs in this country :

"Patna, June 15—The Bihar State graduates Association has expressed deep regret over the most tragic death of Mr. Ramanand Prasad Singh, M.A., M.Sc. (London) who is said to have committed suicide the other day, and has further requested the State Government to institute a probe into the conditions which compelled Mr. Singh to take his precious life.

"Mr. Singh had recently obtained the M.Sc. degree in Economics from the University of London and he could not get a suitable employment anywhere in spite of his sincere efforts for the last two years. It is said, he was so much fed up with his continuous unemployment that out of frustration he committed suicide. He belonged to village Sadanandpur under the Balia P.S. in Begusarai Sub-division of the Monghyr district.

"The Association has made a fervent appeal to all the educationists and the graduate-members of the Legislature of the State to think seriously over this tragic incident and devise some ways and means so that such unfortunate incidents may not occur in future."[1]

New trends in the causes and methods employed for suicides are fast coming to the fore. Various causes of suicides that throng the columns of daily newspapers are mostly due to failures in love-affairs; stringent economic condition and domestic troubles. The number of males is always higher than that of females. Strangulation or hanging by rope, drowning, poisoning, falling down a running train, taking strong drugs etc. are now some of the most common methods employed for self-destruction by both the sexes alike. Religious suicides are now wholly extinct, though old men yet

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[1] *Aryavarta* (Hindi), Patna, June 17, 1960, p. 8.

prefer to go to the holy places to pass the last days of their life to achieve *nirvāṇa* or *mokṣa*, but not in the way they did in ancient or mediaeval times. We have taken into full consideration all these aspects in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER III

# SUICIDES : KINDS AND METHODS

The story of suicide is as old and thrilling as the story of man. It begins just with the coming of society into being. In the beginning, very great religious sanctity was attached to it, but later with the growing complex socio-economic problems of man and his society, it expressed itself through extraordinary shapes. Religion though a dominant factor, this social problem nevertheless now assumed a different look, and society instead of denouncing such feats gradually came to sympathise with the victims. The problem of suicide has thus manifold aspects. As a matter of fact, the story of suicide is the living story of man's various social, economic and religious problems and his continuous struggle against failure for overcoming these problems. In spite of severe denunciations and condemnations by the ancient and mediaeval authorities, suicide has continued to be practised since times immemorial, and it will continue unchecked and unabated, so long as man's various problems are there, with all their nakedness and horror. We propose to deal with the history of suicide and its various relative aspects in the following pages.

Suicides in general may broadly be classified under two heads :

(I) General suicides;

(II) Religious suicides.

## (I) General Suicides

Suicides in general include social, economic and political instances which we come across in our ancient classical literature and also in epigraphic records and other documents.

From various quarters of the world we hear of the immolation of men for the service of the dead, the victims generally being slaves, wives or captives of war or sometimes friends. The rite occurred more or less extensively in Borneo and the Phillipine islands, in Melanesia and Polynesia and in different parts of Africa and among some American tribes. "In China the burial of living persons with the dead dates from the darkest mist of ages; and this custom was so common that it did not occur to the annalists and chroniclers to set down such every day matters as any thing remarkable."[1] In ancient India too, self-immolation seems to have been practised by men. In the *Puruṣa-sūkta* of the *Ṛgveda* we are told : "with sacrifice the gods worshipped the sacrifice. These were the first institutions. These great beings attained to the heaven where the gods, the ancient Sādhyas reside."[2]

Some scholars connect this very remarkable hymn with another verse of the same Book.[3] In this verse *Hiraṇyagarbha*, identified with Prajāpati, the Lord of

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[1] Westermarck, *Origin and Development of Moral Ideas*, vol. i. (Sec. on *Human Sacrifice*).

[2] cf. the following verse in the *ṚV*, X. 10,6,8. which is cited by some scholars as a sanction for suicide at the confluence of the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā at Prayāga (also referred to in the preceding pages) :

सितासिते सरिते यत्र सङ्गते तत्राप्लुतासो दिवमुत्पतन्ति।
ये वै तन्वं विसृजन्ति धीरास्ते जनासोऽमृतत्वं भजन्ते।

[3] *ṚV*, X. 121, 2.

Creatures, is called *ātmada* (giver of self) "whose shadow, whose death is immortality to us." The underlying significance of these verses becomes all the more remarkable when read with the following texts of the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* : "The Lord of the creatures offered himself a sacrifice for the Devas" and "....there are a man, a horse, a bull, a ram and a he-goat, for such are all the animals used for sacrifice. Animals are food; he thus lays down in front whatever food there is, and seeing that Agni turns into him. A man he slaughters first, for man is the first of animals."[1]

According to Muir,[2] there are two other hymns of the *Ṛgveda*, besides the *Puruṣa* hymn, referred to above, in which God is represented as either the agent, the object, or the subject of sacrifice. In one[3] of these verses the god Viśvakarman is said to sacrifice himself or to himself and to offer up heaven and earth, while in the other[4] it is stated that the gods sacrificed to the (supreme) God, or that they offered him up. This contention gets further support from the following extract from the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* :[5]

"To them (the Devas), the Lord of Creatures gave himself. He became their sacrifice. Sacrifice is good for the gods. He, having given himself to them, made a reflection of himself which is sacrifice. Therefore, they say that the Lord of Creatures is a sacrifice for he made it a reflection of himself. By means of this sacrifice he redeemed himself from them."

The same Prajāpati is again elsewhere represented as "one half mortal and the other half immortal, and

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[1] *Śat. Brā.*, VI. 2,1,16.
[2] Muir, *Hindu Tales.*
[3] *ṚV*, X. 81,5-6.
[4] *ṚV*, X. 13,3.
[5] *Śat. Brā.*, XIII. vi. 1 ff.

with that which was mortal he was afraid of death."[1] The following extract from the *Āraṇyaka Brāhmaṇa*[2] of the *Black Yajurveda* amply illustrates this point:

"When the gods celebrated a sacrifice with Puruṣa as their oblation, the spring was its butter, summer its fuel, and autumn its (supplementary) oblation. When the gods were celebrating the sacrifice on the grass, even him, the Puruṣa who was begotten in the beginning. With him as their offering, the gods, the Sādhyas and Ṛṣis also sacrificed."

These and other pieces of evidence, viz., the *Puruṣamedha* of Nārāyaṇa in which we are told that Nārāyaṇa (the original male), having sacrificed with it, surpassed all things, the *Sunaḥśepa* story and other legends and myths tend to show that side by side with human sacrifices, self-immolation also came to be practised on a large scale, of course under the garb of religious observances, during the Vedic period.

Keith, however, does not agree with this view. According to him, neither in the *Ṛgveda* nor in the later *Saṁhitas* and *Brāhmaṇas* is there any clear recognition of such a usage "unless we accept the suggestion of Hillebrandt that the consecration ceremony (*dīkṣā*), which is an essential preliminary to the most important rites, is in reality a faded form of the older practice of suicide by fire."[3] There are, however, in the *Brāhmaṇas* two doctrines which undoubtedly pave the way for the approval of suicide from religious motives: (i) there is developed the conception that the proper sacrifice is that of a man's self, and that other forms of suf-

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[1] R. L. Mitra, *Indo-Aryans*, ii, pp. 115 ff.
[2] *Ibid.*, ii, pp. 79 ff.
[3] *ERE*, xii, 33.

fering are substitutes,[1] and (ii) in the *Satapatha*,[2] the closing act of both the *Puruṣamedha* and the *Sarvamedha*, the human and the universal sacrifices, is the giving away by the performer of the whole of his possessions, including in the latter case even the land, and his wandering into the forest, doubtless as a preliminary to an early death.

The *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* of the *Ṛgveda*, however, gives the details of the story which connects these hymns with a human sacrifice. Accordingly one Hariścandra had made a vow to immolate his first-born to Varuṇa, if that divinity would bless him with children. A child was born named Rohita, and Varuṇa claimed it; but the father evaded fulfilling his promise under various pretexts, until Rohita, grown upto man's stature, ran away from home when Váruṇa afflicted the father with dropsy. At last Rohita purchased one Śunaḥśepa from Ajigarta for a hundred heads of cattle, had him tied to a stake, and was about to have him immolated in redemption of his father's vow to Varuṇa, when the victim at the suggestion of Viśvāmitra, recited the hymns, and was thereby released. This story is, with some slight variations in minor details, reproduced in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. The *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* gives seriatim the initials of the several hymns as they were supposed to have been recited, and as they occur in the Saṁhitās, but the other works refer to them generally, without any specific quotation.[3]

The story of Śunaḥśepa must be accepted as a positive proof in favour of the theory that at the time

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[1] Keith's trans. of *Taittirīya Saṁhitā*, pt. i, p. cvi ff.
[2] XIII, vi, p. 1 ff.
[3] R. L. Mitra, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-72.

of the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, the Hindus did tolerate human sacrifice, though it was rare. If we assume that this sacrifice was a symbolic one, we would be totally destroying the *raison d'etre* of the legend, divesting it of all sensational elements and making it quite flat, stale and unprofitable. The great object of the legend, whether it be intrinsically true or false, was to extol the merits of the hymns in rescuing a victim from a sacrificial stake; but if the stake be divested of its horrors, that object would be entirely defeated.[1]

It may be safely argued that the sacrifice of Śunaḥśepa to the water-god Varuṇa was the type on which the offering of infants to the water-goddess Gaṅgā at the confluence of the river of that name with the sea, the emblem of the water-god Varuṇa, was made and the latter was duly and pretty extensively observed for centuries, until finally put down by the British Government at the beginning of the present century. "It should be added here that the offering did not invariably or even generally lead to a murder, for a priest or a by-stander generally took up the child from the water, and brought him up as a foster-son, very much in the same way as Viśvāmitra did in the case of Śunaḥśepa."[2]

Coming to the Upaniṣads we get almost a different picture. They represent a spirit of intellectual revolt. The rigid religious sacrifices evoked bitter criticism from the great seers and philosophers of the time. The Brāhmaṇas or the priests went to the extreme in exploiting the religious beliefs and superstitions of the common mass, which engendered great opposition. The expensive sacrifices were declared "irreligious and

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 79.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 79. For other details regarding Puruṣamedha etc. see pp. 79 ff.

foolish"[1] by Yājñavalkya, Janaka, Videha and other philosophers of the time. The upholders of such sacrifices were even denounced as "fools and fanatics" and "the draught animals of the Devas."[2] In turn, knowledge of *Ātman* and *Brahman* was accorded the supreme place by the upaniṣadic philosophers. The age-old, worn-out conventions were thus discarded for the time being. There dawned a new age which heralded a glorious chapter in the history of human thought. Hence it is very difficult to find instances of self-immolation in the pages of the Upaniṣads. But, the teaching of the Upaniṣads, which emptied empirical life of all true reality, held out union with the true infinite as the result of Knowledge and glorified the cessation of existence, must have tended to the same result, but the logical conclusion of their thought is not expressed in any of the older Upaniṣads. Only late works such as *Jābāla*[3] and *Kaṇṭhaśruti Upaniṣads* lay down that "the *sannyāsin*, who has acquired full insight, may enter upon the great journey, or choose death by voluntary starvation, by drowning, by fire or by a hero's fate."[4] On the other hand, suicide (*ātmaghātaka*) is condemned to postmortuary penalties which follow the soul. The *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad* bitterly attacks those who indulge in such heinous acts : "Those who take their lives reach after death the sunless regions, covered by impenetrable darkness."[5] With the dawn of this new era meditation came to be valued more than the rigorous practices of sacrifices and self-immola-

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[1] For details see the author's book, *History of Mithilā*, pp. 98 ff.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] 5; cf. P. Deussen, *The Philosophy of the Upaniṣads*, 1906, p. 382.

[4] F.O. Schrader, *The Minor Upaniṣads*, i, pp. 39, 390 ff (Madras, 1912).

[5] cf. the following verse :

tion. Knowledge of *Brahman* was now the supreme factor that guided the morals of the majority of the people.

The epics—the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*—are full of the instances of suicide, but they generally refer to religious suicides to be committed at the various places of pilgrimage which we have dealt with in the next section on "Religious suicides." We have very few references to general suicides. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*,[1] however, Śarabhaṅga is said to have entered fire. Further, we have an example of "mass-suicide" in the *Rāmāyaṇa*[2] itself. It is said that Rāmacandra had once promised that if ever a man violated his order or wish, he would abandon him. Unfortunately, Lakṣmaṇa happened to be the first to act to the contrary, though unintentionally. Rāmacandra thereupon deserted him for good. Separation from Rāma was too hard a blow for Lakṣmaṇa to stand. He reached the Guptāraghāṭa and killed himself by drowning in the water of the sacred Sarayū. Sītā and Kauśalyā had died earlier. With the death of Lakṣmaṇa, Rāma also lost all interest in life. He then, together with Bharata and Śatrughna left this world by drowning in the Sarayū river near the same ghāṭa. This news spread like a wild-fire throughout the length and breadth of Ayodhyā. Aggrieved and depressed, thousands of inhabitants of Ayodhyā followed suit. As a result of this mass-suicide, the smiling and rich Ayodhyā assumed a sad spectacle of a deserted and barren city. This incident is perhaps

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असूर्या नाम ये लोका अन्धेन तमसा वृता:
तांस्ते प्रेत्याभिगच्छन्ति ये के चात्महनो जना:

(Quoted in *TK*. Intro., lxiii).

[1] *Araṇya*., Chap. IX.
[2] *Ibid*.

a unique record of suicide, and hardly bears any parallel in the history of the world. It shows that the practice of self-immolation prevailed on such a wide scale that even Rāma, the God-incarnation, could hardly avoid.

Kauṭilya also makes the qualification on secular and religious grounds.[1] In a very strong language he condemns those men and women who under the infatuation of love, anger, or other sinful passions, commit or cause to commit suicide by means of rope, arms or poison. They should, according to him, be dragged by means of a rope along the public road by the hands of a caṇḍāla. For such murderers neither cremation-rites nor any obsequies, usually performed by relatives, shall be observed. Any relative who performs funeral rites of such wretches shall either himself be deprived of his own funeral or be abandoned by his kith and kin. Besides, whosoever associates himself with such persons and performs forbidden rites shall, with his other associates, if any, forfeit within a year the privileges of conducting or superintending a sacrifice, of teaching and of giving and receiving gifts.[2] This provision is obviously meant for Brāhmaṇa priests.

The normal procedure for investigating a case of suicide, as suggested by Kauṭilya, was that in cases of murder or suicide, the *Kaṇṭaka-śodhana*—commissioners (magistrates dealing with criminal cases)—took hold of the dead body, examined it, ascertained the circumstances of death, and then tried to find out the real cause of such deaths. The dead man's body, in case of suicide, was exposed in the public thoroughfare. The treatment of the bodies of such persons was subjected to insults

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[1] *Arth.*, IV, 7 (cf. *āśumṛtaka-parīkṣā*).
[2] *Ibid.*

and indignities, as in mediaeval Europe. In the case of women, who committed suicide, their bodies were also similarly treated.[1]

It is indeed very difficult to explain as to why Kauṭilya prescribed such brutal treatment to the bodies of suicides. It may be that the object was to check suicide, which was described as a pious act by some of the heretical teachers. In the case of women the object was to check laxity or weakness on their part.[2]

The age of the Dharmaśāstras is, however, quite different from the preceding ones. From the writings of the *Dharmaśāstra-kāras* it can safely be concluded that suicide or an attempt to commit suicide came to be condemned as a great sin. The general questions that exercised the minds of many writers on Dharmaśastra was whether ending one's life by starting on the great journey (*Mahāprasthāna*) or by falling from a precipice is sinful or not? The *Brahmapurāṇa*[3] says that those who commit suicide by poison, fire, hanging, drowning, or falling from a cliff or a tree, should be classed with those who commit *Mahāpātakas* (cardinal sins).[4] Such persons should not be cremated nor

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[1] N. C. Banerjee, *Kauṭilya*, p. 217: "घातयेत् स्त्री वा स्वयमात्मानाम् पापेनमोहिता रज्जुना राजमार्गे तां चण्डालेनापकर्षयेत्" (*Arth.*, IV. 7).

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Cited by Nanda Paṇḍita in his *Vidvāṇmanoharā*, p. 133, The *Brahmapurāṇa* belongs to a much later period.

[4] *Ibid.*, cf. the following verse:

क्रोधात्प्रायं विषं वह्नि शस्त्रमुद्बन्धनं जलम्
गिरिवृक्षप्रपातं च ये कुर्वन्ति नराधमाः
महापातकिनो ये च पतितास्ते प्रकीर्तिताः
पतितानां न दाहस्स्यान्नान्त्येष्टिर्नास्थिसञ्चयः
न चातुपातः पिण्डो वा कार्यं श्राद्धादिकं क्वचित्

should usual funeral rites be performed for them.[1] The condemnation is, however, explained away as inapplicable to religious suicide, as it is deliberately done, without any passion.[2]

This is the general rule. To it, however, the Purāṇas and the Smṛtis state five exceptions:

(a) *Satī* or self-immolation of women, either with (*sahamaraṇam*) or after (*anumaraṇam*) the cremation of their husbands, comes first.

(b) Suicide by drowning is not only permitted but enjoined at the confluence of the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā at Prayāga. Self-cremation at one of the *tīrthas* is also commended.[3]

(c) The Purāṇas permit persons, who suffer from incurable diseases, or who are too old to do their appointed religious duties, to terminate their lives voluntarily by drowning, starvation, falling from cliffs, or self-cremation.[4]

(d) It is specially recommended for ascetics, and

(e) Terminating one's life towards the end by *mahāprasthāna* is a recognised form of exit from the world.

All these exceptions barring one (c) relate to religious suicide, which has been separately dealt with elsewhere in this chapter.

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[1] Also cf. *Manu*. V. 89; VI. 31.

[2] See *Infra* (Religious Suicides).

[3] *Ibid*.

[4] Cf. the following verse in the *Ādipurāṇa*:

वृद्धः शौचस्मृतेर्लुप्तः प्रत्याख्यातभिवक्रियः
आत्मानं घातयेद्यस्तु भृग्वग्न्यनशनादिभिः
तस्य त्रिरात्रमाशौ चं द्वितीये त्वस्थिसंचयः
तृतीये तूदकं कृत्वा चतुर्थे श्राद्धमाचरेत्

The *Vājasaneyi Saṁhitā*[1] contains a verse which declares: "whoever destroy their self reach after death *Asura* world that is shrouded in blinding darkness." This, according to some, refers to persons ignorant of the correct knowledge of the *Self*. This has further been interpreted by many as referring to those guilty of suicide (*ātmahan*).[2]

The *Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra*[3] (3rd cent. B.C.) ordains "whoever kills himself becomes *abhiśapta* (guilty of mortal sin) and his *sapiṇḍas* have to perform no death-rites for him.....A *dvija* (Brāhmaṇa), who through affection performs the last rites of a man who commits suicide, must undergo the penance of *cāndrāyaṇa* with *tapta kṛccha*." It also prescribes a *prāyaścitta* (penance) for merely resolving to kill oneself (even when no actual attempt is made).

In *Vasiṣṭha*[4] again, it is also explicitly expressed that the world of *brahman* is obtained by entering fire, and in *Āpastamba*[5] (5th cent. A.D.) we have an interesting discussion which ends with a defence of secular life aims. It is admitted that in one view the ideal was for an ascetic first to live on fruits, roots, grass and leaves only, then on those things alone which become spontaneously detached, then on water, then on air and finally on ether alone.

Manu,[6] (200 B.C.—A.D. 200), the great law-giver, says that no water is to be offered for the benefit of

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[1] *Vāj. Saṁ.*, 40.3.

[2] cf. *Uttararāma-carita*, IV. after v. 3 ("अंधतामिस्रा ह्यसूर्या नाम ते लोकास्तेभ्यः प्रतिविधीयन्ते य आत्मघातिन इत्येवमृषयो मन्यन्ते"). Also see *Bṛh. Up.*, IV. 4.11.

[3] *Vas. Dh. S.*, XXIII, 14-16, 18.

[4] *Ibid.*, XXIX. 4.

[5] II, ix. 23.2.

[6] *Manusmṛti*, V. 89.

the souls of those who kill themselves. There are some scholars who put forward a Vedic passage: "one who desires heaven should not (seek to) die before the appointed span of life is at an end (of itself)." Medhātithi on Manu[1] quotes this vedic text and explains it by saying that "if *Śruti* intended to lay down an absolute prohibition against suicide in every case, it should have simply said, 'one who desired heaven should not (seek to) die.'"

The *Viṣṇu Saṁhitā* (1st-3rd cent. A.D.) has also nothing but condemnation for such persons. It says: "he, who cuts the rope by which (a suicide) has hung himself becomes purified by performing the *tapta kṛcchа*. So does he who sheds tears for them."[2]

The *Ādiparva* (post-Maurya or Gupta period) of the *Mahābhārata*[3] declares that one who commits suicide does not reach blissful worlds.

The *Yama-smṛti* (6-7th cent. A.D.) goes a step further in condemning such criminals. It declares: "when a person tries to do away with himself by such methods as hanging, if he dies, his body should be smeared with impure things, and if he lives, he should be fined two hundred paṇas; his friends and sons should each be fined one paṇa and then they should undergo the penance laid down in the Śāstra."[4]

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[1] *Ibid.*, IV. 32: "ननु च तस्मादु ह न पुरायुषः स्वः कामी प्रेयादिति श्रुतिस्तत्र कुतो वानप्रस्थस्य शरीरत्यागः।.....अवस्थाविशेषे ह्यनभिप्रेते मरणे एतावदेवावक्ष्यन्त स्वः कामी प्रेयादिति" (Medhātithi on *Manu*, IV. 32; Kulluka on *Manu*, IV. 31 etc.).

[2] *VS*, xix. 8-9; xx. 6-7; xxxiii. 1-2.

[3] *Mbh.*, 179-20.

[4] *Yama.*, 20-21:

आत्मानं घातयेद्यस्तु रज्ज्वादिभिरुपक्रमैः
मृतोऽभेध्येन लेप्तव्यो जीवतो द्विशतंदमः

Parāśara[1] (7th cent. A.D.) states that if a man or a woman commits suicide by hanging through extreme pride, or extreme rage or through affliction or fear, he or she "is consigned to the darkness of a hell for sixty thousand years, which is full of blood and fetid pus." Further, "no period of uncleanness should be observed in respect of such a violent death. The rite of cremation is denied to the corpse of a suicide, no tears should be shed for, nor any libation of water should be offered unto (the spirit of) a suicide." If people cremate the corpse of a suicide they would regain their personal "cleanness" by practising a *tapta kṛccha vratam* (penance observed in order to purify one's body in accordance with śāstric injunctions). If they happen to be Brāhmaṇas they should feed Brāhmaṇas and make the gift of a cow to regain their "cleanness."

The *Saṁvarta*[2] and *Likhita-smṛti*[3] (8th cent. A.D.) denounce such criminals and declare that "no tear should be shed by the good, seeking their own well-being, for those killed by kine or for those who have committed suicide..... The offering of water and funeral cakes (and the performance of *śrāddha*) for the great sinners or for those who have committed suicide do not at all reach (them), but are stolen by the *Rākṣasas* (the demons)."

From the above accounts it is clear that while suicides on religious grounds were permitted, in most

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[1] *Parāśara-smṛti*, IV. 1-2 :

अतिमानादतिक्रोधात्स्नेहाद्वां यदि वा भयात्
उद्बध्नीयात्स्त्री पुमान्वा गतिरेषा विधीयते
पूयशोणितसंपूर्णे अन्धे तमसि मज्जति
षष्टिं वर्षसहस्राणि नरकं प्रतिपद्यते

[2] Quoted in *History of Dharmaśāstra*, Vol. I (section on *Suicide*).

[3] *Ibid.*

cases although not without strong protests, suicides in general were universally denounced and reprobated throughout ancient and early mediaeval times. In the early and late mediaeval periods we find Hinduism standing firmly on the position reached in the *Dharma-sūtras*. Religious suicides apart, ordinary forms of self-murder are generally censured, of course with a few exceptions. Should a Brāhmaṇa be overtaken by disease or great misfortunes, he is expressly permitted "to walk straight on in a north-easterly direction subsisting on water and air until his body sinks to rest."[1]

We have elsewhere shown that in the *Mahābhārata*[2] while suicide is denounced in one place, at another there are instances of it, as in the case of Duryodhana.[3] The *Pañcatantra* (Gupta period?) narrates a very interesting tale.[4] A pigeon roasts itself as a guest-offering for a hunter. The wife of the bird declines to survive her husband. She then commits suicide purely out of love for her husband. Their suffering makes the hunter so aggrieved and repentant that he, too, ends his life by fire. The case of Dadhīci, the great seer-king who is said to have offered his bones to Indra to prepare the terrible weapon *vajra* (thunder-bolt) to defeat the demons, is another significant instance in point. This and other instances clearly show that the ancient customs and traditions prevailed and dominated the Hindu society till and after the advent of the Muslim power in India.

The conflicting nature of laws, given by the *Dharma-sūtrakāras*, regarding punishments, proved rather too weak to arrest this abnormal tendency. People did

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[1] *Manu.*, VI, pp. 31 ff.
[2] XII. ccxcvii, pp. 31 ff.
[3] *Mbh.*, III, ccli, pp. 20 ff.
[4] *Pañcatantra* (trans. by Benfey, Leipzig, 1859), ii, pp. 247 ff. Also see *Mbh.*, XII, cxliii, 10 ff.

what they liked to, without any forceful opposition or hindrance from any quarters whatsoever.

Sometimes suicides were indulged in on a mass scale. From the *Harṣacarita*[1] we learn how before and after the death of Prabhākaravardhana many of the king's friends (for example his physician Rāsāyana), ministers, servants and favourites killed themselves. We further learn that his wives also competed amongst themselves for dying along with him on his funeral pyre.[2] The *Rājataraṅgiṇī* has yet another tale to tell. It is said, when the queen of Ananta practised *satī* on the death of her husband, her litter-carrier and some other men and three of her *dāsīs* (maid-servants) followed her in death.[3] There is also the example of a mother who burnt herself on the funeral pyre of her son, out of grief.[4] It further tells us that there were certain officers appointed by the king to superintend *Prāyopaveśa* (resolving on death by fasting).[5] This shows that such deaths occurred on a large scale, for which the king had to make special arrangements. It is, however, noteworthy that we do not come across any voice of protest through the pages of this celebrated work. But, the death of the physician and ministers of Rājya-

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[1] *Harṣacarita*, V, 3rd para from end.
[2] For details see *Ibid.*, V.
[3] *Rājataraṅgiṇī*, VII. 481 :

गंगाधरष्टक्कि बुद्धो युग्मवाहश्च दण्डकः
ताबुद्धा नोतिका वल्गा चेति दास्यस्तदान्वयुः

[4] *Ibid.*, VII. 1380 :

स्वामिकृत्योद्यमस्तुत्यसूतिषु स्त्रीषु पूज्यताम्
गज्जा तज्जननी स्वस्य नमस्यन्त्यविशच्चिताम्

[5] *Ibid.*, VII. 1411 :

युगान्तानपि जीवित्वा कायः सापाय एव यः
वत्त्यागनात्रसाध्येर्थे धिग्दैन्यमनुजीविनाम्

vardhana, as recorded in the *Harṣacarita* reminds us of the somewhat similar death practised by the Japanese minister who shot himself after the death of the last Mikado. Many Brazilian Indians also killed themselves on the graves of their chiefs.[1] We have another instance of this mass-suicide in the *Rāmāyaṇa* discussed in the preceding pages.

What do these instances point to? Why this colossal indifference towards the most precious thing on earth—life? They clearly show that when there was enough attachment to persons or even to ideas, people ceased to have all interest in life and were prepared to sacrifice it as if it were a trifle. Epigraphic records sometimes furnish us with nerveracking examples of such offerings. The supreme instance of this we have in the suicide (purely from personal affection) of the General of Vīra Bellāla, Kuvara Lakṣmaṇa (or Kumāra Lakṣma) with his wife Suggalā Devī, and the army attached to him, at least a select part of it. He was both the Minister and General of Vīra Bellāla, who loved him as his own son. "Between servant and king there was no difference: the glory and the marks of royalty were equal in both."[2] Kuvara Lakṣmaṇa devoted his all for Vīra Bellāla and "conquered the world for him as far as the Southern ocean."[3] His wife Suggalā Devī was equally devoted to her lord. Moreover, he had gathered around him a thousand warriors, ready to live and die with him. He set up a *vīra-śāsana* (which is recorded on a pillar near the Hoysaleśvara temple at Halebid). On this are placed images of himself and Garuḍa indicating that the latter

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[1] Westermarck, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, pp. 230 ff.
[2] *IA*, XXXV, p. 130.
[3] *Ibid.*

alone was equal in devotion to his master. "While all the world was praising him as the founder of the greatness and increase of King Bellāla, and the cause of his prosperity, the Daṇḍeśa Lakṣma, together with his wife (Suggalā Devī) mounted upon the splendid stone-pillar, covered with the poetical *vīra-śāsana*, proclaiming his devotion to his master: and on the pillar they became united with Lakṣmī and with Garuḍa."[1]

The inscription is left incomplete. But the sculptures on the pillar, being all figures of men with swords, cutting off their own arms and legs, and even their own heads, indicate unmistakably what had been done. This example was followed by others and acts of such wholesale immolation are on record on the occasion of the death of war-like successors of Vīra Bellāla. It is, indeed, very hard to find any parallel to such acts of mass-suicide, purely out of a depth of devotion, in the history of the mediaeval world.

*Among the Rajputs*:

The history of Rajasthan is, in a sense, the history of heroic self-sacrifices and indiscriminate bloodsheds. Patriotism demanded some sort of sacrifices and the gallant Rajputs were always there to respond to the national call. At the time of Ala-ud-Din's invasion of Chitore, it is said, once the Guardian-Goddess of Chitore demanded that, "if twelve who wear the diadem bleed not for Chitore, the land will pass from the line." This gave rise to a generous contention among the brave brothers as to who should be the first victim to avert the denunciation. Urasī urged his priority of birth: he was proclaimed. The wheel was set in motion. One followed the other. Eleven had fallen in turn.

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[1] *Ibid.*

The Rāṇā himself completed the list by following his brave sons, calling around him his devoted clans, for whom life had no longer any charm. They threw open the portals, descended to the plain, and with a reckless despair "carried death or met in the crowded ranks of Alla."[1]

When Ajmer was lost forever to Marwar, the governor Dumarāja, before he committed suicide spoke: "Tell the Rājā, thus only could I testify my obedience, and over my dead body alone could a Southerner enter Ajmer."[2] Ānandapāla, son of Jayapāla, the Shahi ruler of the Punjab, had also committed suicide by jumping into the fire after he was defeated by Mahmud Ghazani (1065 A.D.)

The history of the Rajputs is full of such innumerable acts of self-immolation by males and females alike, which always bore patriotic tinge.

*Avenging an injury* :

Besides religious and other suicides, as enjoined by the Dharmaśāstras, very often the Brāhmaṇas resorted to suicide for avenging an injury. It was then generally believed that the ghost of such deceased would harass and prosecute the offender. Great efficacy was, therefore, attributed to the curse of a dying Brāhmaṇa. Instances of this kind are numerous to show how the Brāhmaṇas—both male and female—burned themselves to death and cursed their offender. In course of time this became a strong weapon in their (Brāhmaṇas') hands to beat their enemies with, and get the wrongs righted either by threat or by intimidation.

The unfortunate victims were mostly the rājās

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[1] Todd, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, vol. i, p. 221.
[2] *Ibid.*, vol. ii, p. 105.

(kings). It is said, when one of the Rajput rājās once levied war-subsidy on the Brāhmaṇas, "some of the wealthiest, having expostulated in vain, poniarded themselves in his presence, pouring maledictions on his head with their last breath, and thus cursed, the rājā laboured under a ban of ex-communication even amongst his personal friends."[1] Again, we are told of a Brāhmaṇa-girl "who, having been seduced by a certain rājā, burned herself to death and in dying imprecated the most fearful curses on the rājā's kindred."[2] After this event they had to face a succession of disasters and finally had to abandon their family settlement at Baliyā (Balliā in U.P.), where "the woman's tomb is worshipped to this day."[3]

Once a certain rājā ordered that the house of a Brāhmaṇa be demolished, and resumed the land which had once been conferred upon him. This aggrieved the Brāhmaṇa so much that he resorted to fast at the palace-gate, till he died and became thus a *Brahma* or malignant Brāhmaṇa-ghost "who avenged the injury he had suffered by destroying the rājā and his house."[4] At Azamgarh (U.P.), in 1835, a Brāhmaṇa "threw himself down a well, so that his ghost might haunt his neighbour."[5]

The same idea probably underlies the custom of "*sitting dharaṇā*"—generally practised by creditors who sat down before the doors of their debtors "threatening to starve themselves to death if their claims were not

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[1] Willian Crooke, *Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India*, vol. i, p. 191 ff; Todd, quoted by Chevers, *op. cit.*, pp. 659 ff.
[2] Crooke, *op. cit.*, vol. i, p. 193.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 193.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 191.
[5] Chevers, *op. cit.*, p. 663.

paid,"[1] and the sin attached to causing the death of a Brāhmaṇa "would further increase the efficacy of the creditors' threat."[2] It should be added that in India, as elsewhere, the souls of those who have killed themselves or met death by any other violent means are regarded as particularly malevolent and troublesome.[3]

This practice of self-immolation is now almost extinct, though resort to hunger-strike for getting grievances redressed is yet practised by political leaders.

*Among the Muslims* :

There is no specific text of the *Qurān* which forbids suicide, "though it would seem clear that the texts which bear upon the taking of human life in generai, are sufficiently clear as to their purpose to include any kind of wilful killing in private life."[4] As a matter of fact, Islam condemns suicide as an act interfering with the decrees of God and the Muhammadans believe that "it is a greater sin for a person to kill himself than to kill a fellow-man."[5] The *Qurān* says : "it is not for any soul to die, save by God's permission written down for an appointed time.....Spend in the way of Allāh and cast not yourselves to perdition with your own hands."[6]

The attitude of Muhammad has no doubt been correctly interpreted by *hadiths* which Bukhari accepts as genuine : "whosoever shall kill himself shall suffer in the fire of hell.....shall be excluded from heaven

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[1] Steinmetz, "Gli antichi scongiuri giuridici contro i creditori" in *Rivista italiana di Sociologia*, ii, 58, 37 ff; Balfour, *Cyclopaedia of India*, i, p. 934 ff.

[2] Balfour, *op. cit.*, i, p. 935; Westermarck, *op. cit.*, ii, pp. 245-46.

[3] Crooke, *op. cit.*, i, p. 269; Fawcett, *The Madras Government Museums Bulletin*, iii, p. 253.

[4] *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. xii, p. 38.

[5] Westcott, *Suicide*, p. 12.

[6] M. Muhammad Ali, *The Holy Qurān*, iv, 33.

for ever."[1]

So, for several centuries past there has been unanimity of opinion throughout the Muslim world that suicide is a violation of a divine command contained in the *Qurān* and the Sunnah of the prophet. Because of this nature of the Muslims' belief in God and the future life there have been very few cases of suicide in the regions of Islam in the past. Suicide, to a Muslim, is an act of revolt against God, and "the perpetrator of the act risks the wrath of God and the indescribable penalties of the Fire."[2] Suicide is thus said to be very rare in the Muslim world.[3]

There is a tradition among the Muslims that once "Muhammad refused to bury a suicide, and his example has established a law to that effect in Islam."[4] But, as we shall show below, in spite of the law, however, it was customary to accord the funeral rites in such cases in the Muslim world.

In the mediaeval age suicides did occur among the Muslims of India, who were then an accomplished political factor and the virtual rulers of the land. But most of these suicides which were in a sense historic ones, used to be given a decent burial. In some cases they were even greatly eulogised. Jahangir in his *Memoirs*[5] refers to one such case: "On Thursday, 24th April 1608, Jalāl-ud-Din Masūd, who held the rank of 400 personnel, died at about the age of 50 or 60 years of diarrhoea. He was an opium-eater and used to eat opium after breaking it to pieces like cheese, and it is

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[1] *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. xii, p. 38.
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] Lisle, *Du Suicide*, pp. 305, 345 etc.; Legoyt, *Le suicide ancien et moderne*, p. 7; Westcott, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
[4] *ERE*, XII, p. 38.
[5] *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, vol. i, p. 141.

notorious that he frequently ate opium from the hand of his own mother. When his disease became violent, and there was a prospect of his death, his mother from excessive love for him ate more opium than was right and out of that which she used to give her own son, and two or three hours after his death, she died. Nothing like this was ever manifested on the part of mothers, Musālman or Hindu."[1] Jahangir's sweeping generalisation is, however, erroneous and absurd as Hindu-history is full of such instances of mothers burning themselves on the pyre of their deceased sons, referred to in the preceding pages.

Babar's prayer offering his own life for the recovery of that of his son Humāyun is well known to the students of Indian history. We have another instance of such on offering. Once Jahangir was sick and weak lying at Ajmer. One day one Islām Khan, in the province of Bengal, while sitting in private, suddenly became unconscious and had a mysterious conception that the Emperor had been attacked by sickness for which the only remedy was to sacrifice some thing that was exceedingly dear and precious to himself. And what is dearer and more precious than life !: so he would sacrifice himself for his lord and master. "He hoped that as this was from the bottom of his heart, and the sincerity of his being, it would be accepted at the throne of Allāh. The arrow of prayer at once reached the target of acceptance, and he perceived himself afflicted with weakness and disease. Verily, verily the disease increased till he reached the neighbourhood of the compassion of God (i.e., he died)."[2]

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 141.
[2] *Ibid.*, vol. ii, pp. 130 ff.

We have yet another instance of suicide. When Salim (Jahangir) revolted against his father Akbar, he came down to Allahabad and stayed there. Akbar, out of disgust and annoyance, wanted to adopt Khusarau (Jahangir's son) as his heir to the throne. Salim's wife was Mān Bai, the daugther of Rājā Bhagwan Das of Amber and a cousin of Rājā Man Singh. She was very much perturbed over the new situation. Aggrieved and torn asunder between the conflicts of mind, one day she put an end to her life. This shocked Salim to his bones, who out of grief could not take any thing for days together. Mān Bāi was interred in Khusarau-bagh at Khuldabad (Allahabad), and a tomb was erected over the place of her burial, to commemorate her memory, which still exists.[1]

This and other instances show that, notwithstanding the strictures by Muhammad, suicides among the Muslims were not rare and that the injunctions of the *Qurān* were not always thoroughly observed in letter and spirit, and that suicides were committed by the Muslims on a large scale like the Hindus in all the ages.

*Modern Trends* :

The modern trends show that in different countries the mode of committing suicide also varies in the two sexes, and in different professions. "It is much more common among men than among women, being in the proportion of 3 or 4 to 1,"[2] and this applies to all countries and races. In England and Wales the proportions are three to one, "the rate for males in the quinquennium 1921-25 being 154 per million against

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[1] *Ibid.*, vol. ii, pp. 127 ff; also see *Hindustan* (Hindi weekly), Delhi, Feb. 7, 1954, p. 27.

[2] *Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences*, vol. xiv (Section on *Suicide*).

54 for females."[1] In New Zealand the proportion was even greater, the respective rates being 192 and 46. In Germany, Italy and Netherlands, the ratio was nearly as high as in England and Wales. In Europe, as in other parts of the world, the suicide-rate rises with the age, the maximum being attained after 50. With women, however, the rise is not so regular as with men, there being a more decided rise at the earlier ages of 15 to 20 years. Even in Japan the male-suicide-rate is fifty per cent more than for females.[1] Though we have no official figures for India, our common knowledge shows that the suicide-rate for male is definitely much higher than for female, and there is decidedly a rise at the earlier ages of 15 to 35 years.

As to age, it is said, "suicide augments in the two sexes in direct ratio with age," at least up to the seventieth year. There are instances of suicides at *five years of age* and also *over ninety*. The critical periods of life—adolescence, climateric pregnancy, parturition, nursing and senility—all "increase the tendency to suicide as they increase the tendency to insanity." While men adopt the cruder methods, women avoid in general those methods involving the spilling of blood or personal disfigurement, though in certain cases they were found to resort to such crude methods in India, as we shall presently show in the following pages. In several countries, such as England, Wales, Italy and Japan, new methods of suicides, viz., adoption of coal-gas as a means of self-destruction have of late found currency as a direct legacy of the wars. There has thus been an enormous rise in the suicides by gaseous poisoning during the present century.

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[1] *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. xxi, p. 532.

Suicide, in all civilised countries is thus becoming more and more common every year. According to modern sociologists and psychologists, physical diseases, notably those that are very painful and those that are slow and chronic, increase the number as does the increased consumption of alcohol, especially spirits.

Religious consideration apart, the social circumstances of each country are nevertheless a significant factor which must be taken into serious consideration. In India, suicide is most common among the widowed and least frequent among the married. The military profession, however, furnishes the largest proportion. The suicide-rate for army personnel goes definitely higher than that for the ordinary people. Only one instance would suffice to illustrate this point. On the 23rd February 1954, the Deputy-Defence Minister of India in a written reply to a query put by a member of the Lok Sabha (House of the People) said : "68 members of the Defence Services committed suicide during 1953. Sixty-five of them belonged to the Army, one to the Navy and two to the Air Force. Domestic worries are given as the reason for 27 suicides and disappointment in love for five."[1] The statistics coming as they do from the Government sources, are not wholly reliable and the causes given quite unsatisfactory and vague. Nevertheless, the figures give a clue to the general suicidal trend among the army personnel. Moreover, this is just one year's figure, and if the figures for suicide for years previous and future to 1953 were compiled accurately, it would undoubtedly run into an awful and inconceivable number.

Another significant trend can be seen in the fact

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[1] *The Statesman*, Calcutta, Feb. 24, 1954.

that suicide is more common in the cities than in the rural areas in all parts of the world. The larger the city, the higher is its suicide-rate. The city of Calcutta has most probably the highest suicide-rate in India. Hardly a week passes without a few cases. The explanation probably lies in the greater stability of the country—family, larger number of children and in the moral unified interests, traditions and beliefs of a farming community.

In India, right from the beginning of the 18th century down to the advent of the current century old methods were resorted to for committing suicides. A marked difference is, however, perceptible in the general attitude of the people, more specially so among the aboriginal tribes of India.

To the Pahārias (the aboriginal tribes) of the Rajamahal hills suicide is "a crime in god's eyes," and that "the soul of one who so offends shall not be admitted into heaven, but must hover eternally as a ghost between heaven and earth."[1] The custom among them in the 18th century was; "should a girl be compelled by her parents to marry a man whom she dislikes, and should she be unhappy and leave her husband, and in despair put an end to herself, the parents got a court appointed to enquire how their son-in-law behaved to their daughter."[2] If it should appear that "he treated her cruelly, he was considered guilty of murder and fined,"[3] but not so heavily as is common for the commutation of blood. "If on the contrary it should appear

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[1] Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, *The Aboriginal Tribes of Hyderabad*, vol. ii; Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, p. 268; Sherwill, "Tour through the Rajmahal Hills" in *JASB*, XX, p. 556.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] *Ibid.*

that he behaved well to her, it was deemed suicide."[1]

Among the Hos, another Indian aboriginal tribe, suicide is reported to be so frightfully prevalent as to offer no parallel in any known country. "If a girl appears mortified by any thing that has been said, it is not safe to let her go away till she is soothed. A reflection on a man's honesty or veracity may be sufficient to send him to self-destruction. In a recent case a young woman attempted to poison herself because her uncle would not partake of the food she had cooked for him."[2]

Forced suicide was also prevalent among some of the aboriginal tribes of India, viz., the Khonds and the Mairs. The mode of executing the unfortunate victims was rather horrible. The man selected for this kind of self-destruction was tied to a fixed post in the midst of a multitude of spectators and then cut to pieces with an axe. This practice among the aboriginal tribes existed since time immemorial and was put an end to during the British period.[3]

Among the Korwa tribe a sort of "tranquil despair" is found, "which has resulted in an apathy and a fatalistic submission to diseases and epidemics, which they think, are due to the magic of the other people who sorround them on all sides."[4] But nothing like this is found among the Tharus and several other primitive tribes except the Marias, among whom, like the Hos, suicide is a frequent phenomenon.[5] Further, the Kāfirs of the Hindukush, though they have no intense fear of

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[1] *Ibid.*

[2] Tickell, "Memoir on the Hodesum" in *JASB*, IX, p. 807; Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, p. 206.

[3] *Asiatic Researches*, vol. iv (cf. relative article).

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] V. Elwin, *Maria : Murder and Suicide* (for details).

death, cannot understand suicide; "the idea of a man killing himself strikes them as inexplicable."[1] Similar is the case with several primitive tribes.[2]

*A few instances* :

But the staggering figure for suicide in modern India as we know it through daily newspapers and periodicals and other such sources in the absence of any authoritative official statistics collated, collected and compiled for the purpose beat all the previous records hollow. Big towns and cities with all available modern scientific amenities are the main venues of suicidal activities. Delhi, the capital of India, has witnessed a few historical instances of suicides in recent years. Its famous Qutub-Minar has lately gained notoriety as "a suicide-tower," and has inspired many men and women including the late Rani Sahiba of Kapurthalla State to destroy themselves by falling or jumping down from its top, to escape their somewhat wounded existence. A very recent instance of this feat we have in the death of a 19-year-old girl who committed suicide by jumping from the top storey of the Qutub-Minar : "The girl had gone up the monument with her brother, mother and sister. She is reported to have jumped when they had already started their descent...."[3] The Ochterlony Monument in Calcutta Maidan has also a past record of some notable suicides. We are reproducing below only a few small news-items which are, in our opinion, more than enough to justify our stand :

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[1] Scott Robertson, *Kāfirs of the Hindu-Kush*, p. 381.

[2] For other details, see Westermarck, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, pp. 239 ff.

[3] *The Searchlight*, Patna, July 12, 1960.

(1) "Calcutta, May 6—It is reported, a young man residing at Ballavpur, Serampore, swallowed up a quantity of opium and was removed to Serampore Hospital, where he died on Monday (i.e., 3rd May) shortly after midnight."[1]

(2) "Calcutta, May 8--A servant of a house in Ballygunge Place, named Sukumar De (20) was found hanging in a room on Friday (May 7). The police believed it to be a case of suicide."[2]

(3) "Barasat, May 12—A 45-year-old refugee mukteer (Mukhtar) committed suicide in the afternoon of Tuesday (May 11). The cause of suicide is not known."[3]

(4) "Calcutta, April 15—A woman was found dead on Thursday in the bathroom of her house in Serampore, with severe burns on her dead body. A suspected case of suicide."[4]

(5) "Tarkeshwar, May 17—An unidentified dead body of a young man (aged about 28) was found hanging from a tree in a field near Loknath Railway Station this morning. A suspected case of suicide."[5]

(6) "Calcutta, May 20—A young man Ajit Ghosh, aged 30, attempted to commit suicide by falling down a running train between Dhanyakuria and Ballygunge stations at 10 A.M. today. He was seriously injured and later admitted to Nilratan Sircar Hospital.

"From another report we learn that an unmarried young girl, Nilima De, aged 18, attempted to commit suicide by falling down a running train at Naihati Station. She was also admitted to Nilratan Sircar

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[1] *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*, Calcutta, May 7, 1954.
[2] *Ibid.*, May 9, 1954.
[3] *Ibid.*, May 14, 1954.
[4] *The Statesman*, Calcutta, April 16, 1954.
[5] *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*, Calcutta, May 18, 1954.

Hospital."[1]

(7) "Calcutta, May 20—In South Calcutta, in Bakul Began Road, Mani, a college-student aged 19, committed suicide by hanging with a noose round his neck in his bath-room today. He left behind a letter which stated that no one should be held responsible for his death."[2]

(8) "Calcutta, May 26—The body of a young man aged about 30 was found hanging on a tree in Banerjee-para, Alambazar on Wednesday morning. A suspected case of suicide."[3]

(9) "Kharagpur, May 24—Yesterday morning there was a sensation in the local Golebazar area when in a Railway quarter situated in Mosque Road the dead body of one Renukabala Dassi (22) was discovered which was badly burnt and appeared to be a case of suicide.

"About three years back in the same quarter the first wife of the second occupier of this quarter, it is learnt, also committed suicide. The husband of the deceased woman, who is a Railway employee, together with another woman have been arrested."[4]

(10) "Calcutta, June 10—Three suspected cases of attempted suicide were taken to Hospital from different parts of Calcutta on Thursday (June 10).

"One was a 19-year-old boy who was believed to have swallowed a small amount of potassium cyanide, and a second was a 14-year-old girl who was treated for suspected carbolic acid poisoning. The third person was a 50-year-old man and is said to have

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[1] *Vishwamitra* (Hindi), Calcutta, May 21, 1954.
[2] *Lokamanya* (Hindi), Calcutta, May 21, 1954.
[3] *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*, Calcutta, May 27, 1954.
[4] *Ibid.*, May 28, 1954.

swallowed nitric acid."[1]

(11) "Calcutta, June 15—A 35-year-old man and a woman in her twenties suspected to be suffering from the effects of poisoning, were taken to the Medical College Hospital, from a restaurant in Chittaranjan Avenue today. They died within a few minutes of their being admitted to the Emergency ward.....

"In the woman's hand-bag was a card giving her name as Gita Mukerjee and address.....There was also a telephone number. In the bag was also a small phial containing a yellowish powder.....In the pocket of the man's shirt was a card giving his name as Lakshmi Narain Poddar.....Police investigations confirmed the identification."[2]

(12) "Calcutta, June 16—A 45-year-old refugee Kunj Bihari Das jumped down a running train near Dum Dum Railway Station and was killed at about 2-30 P.M. today.

"It is said, he owned a small shop. But his economic condition was such that he could hardly manage to pay the house-rent for which he was often chided and scolded by the landlord. He took this dangerous step just to get rid of this daily reproach."[3]

(13) "Tehatta (Nadia), June 16—Gobinda Ghosh of Chhatia P.S. Tehatta, is reported to have committed suicide by hanging himself with a rope. He was suffering from a chronic disease."[4]

These are only a few examples from only four Calcutta dailies, only of two months. But, if we take into account all reports on suicides hitherto published

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[1] *The Statesman*, Calcutta, June 11, 1954.
[2] *Ibid.*, June 15, 1954.
[3] *Lokamanya* (Hindi), Calcutta, June 17, 1954.
[4] *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*, Calcutta, June 18, 1954.

in English and other dailies in Indian languages all over the country, the number would be so staggering and horrifying as to make us shudder. Moreover, the task cannot be completed unless all the State Governments maintain accurate and up-to-date figures for suicides in their respective jurisdiction, which would indeed greatly facilitate the task of researchers in this field.

## (II) Religious Suicides

We have shown above that the difference between the ancient Hindu and the modern outlook may be clearly seen in the attitude to death and suffering. The assumption that the doctrine of *Saṁsāra* and *Karma* have their roots in a belief in predestination and the denial of human volition have been exposed in modern studies of Indian philosophy. Death has no terrors for those who believe in the Hindu theory of survival of personality and *Karma*.[1] When one undertook a long and arduous pilgrimage, he went prepared for death. This attitude struck the imagination of Sir William Hunter, when he described with feeling and eloquence how, when the pilgrim enters the ferry over the river Vaitaraṇī, which divides Bengal from the holy land of Utkala, sanctified by the residence of the Lord of the World (Jagannātha) at His City (Purī), the ferryman whispers into the ears of the pilgrim the *mantra*, which associates the mundane stream with the stream of the world, after which it is named, and which the disembodied souls have to cross. It is this spirit that makes the pilgrim, "scorn delights and live laborious days" in the course of the tour, and continue the mode of life after his return home. When a pilgrim is recommended to find release by undertaking the journey from which he

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[1] *TK*, Pref., p. vii.

will not return (*mahāprasthāna*) or find a short-cut to release by drowning himself at the confluence of sacred streams, or by falling from a cliff at Amarakaṇṭaka, "where is the meaning of trying to save his 'life' (and prolong the suffering of endless re-birth) by putting obstacles in the way of his transit?"[1] It was also common for persons who are afflicted with leprosy or any other incurable disease to bury or drown themselves with due ceremonies, by which they are considered acceptable to the deity,[2] or to roll themselves into fires with the notion that thus purified they will receive a happy transmigration into a healthy body.[3] It was common even among great warriors and learned brāhmaṇas. The *Mahābhārata* says that Arjuna was about to slay himself more than once, and the *Rāmāyaṇa* furnishes us with the supreme example of Bharata, the younger brother of Rāma, who was saved by the arrival of Hanumāna with the happy message of Rāma just at the moment of entering the sacrificial fire.[4]

We have shown above how ordinary suicide has been condemned to postmortuary penalties by our ancient authorities. Suicide on flimsy grounds has been strongly denounced by them, without a single voice of protest from any quarter whatever. But in spite of this general attitude exceptions were made in the Smṛtis, the Epics and the Purāṇas in some cases. Persons were allowed to kill themselves by drowning with the desire of securing release from this *Saṁsāra*, at extremely holy places like Prayāga, the Sarasvatī and Kāśī or Vārāṇasī. The Purāṇas and the Smṛtis

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[1] *TK*, Pref., p. vii-viii.

[2] Sleeman, *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official*, ii, pp. 344 ff.

[3] Ward, *op. cit.*, ii, p. 119.

[4] *IA*, xxxv, p. 129.

have made exceptions which include, besides *satī* or self-immolation of women, suicide by drowning at the confluence of the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā at Prayāga; self-cremation at one of the tīrthas; hanging head-downwards over a blazing fire and cutting up one's flesh and offering it to birds of prey; death by fire self-lit at Avimukta (Kāśī or Benares), said to free from re-birth the person who so ends his life;[1] death by starvation as a means to salvation; termination of life voluntarily by drowning, starvation, falling from cliffs or self-cremation, specially recommended for ascetics and termination of one's life towards the end by *mahāprasthāna* (Great journey of life.) Manu also advises intending persons to walk fully determined and go on straight, in a north-easterly direction, subsisting on water and air, until his body sinks to rest.[2]

Several authorities highly commend *mahāprasthāna* as a recognised form of release from the miseries of the world. Lakṣmīdhara and others devote full chapters (always the last ones) to this kind of journey (*Yātrā*). The pilgim is advised to walk on till he drops down or lose his life by fire or in the Himālayan snow, which we have discussed in the following pages. Lakṣmīdhara (12th cent.) places suicide by fire and by falling from a cliff under *mahāpathayātrā*, i.e., "journey by the wide path."[3] Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa[4] and Mitra Miśra[5] discuss

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[1] *TK*, p. 21 :

अग्निप्रवेशं ये कुर्युर विमुक्ते विधानतः
प्रविशन्ति सुखं ते मां न पुनर्भाविनो जनाः

[2] *Manu*, vi. 30.

[3] *TK*, Chap. 24, pp. 258 ff.

[4] *Tristhalīsetu*, (c. 1560 A.D.), Poona, 1915, pp. 290-316.

[5] *Tīrthaprakāśa* in *Vīramitrodaya* (c. 1620 A.D.), Benares, 1917, pp. 242-48, 342-47, 372-73.

at some length the apparent conflict between the inhibition of suicide in general and its commendation when done at Prayāga, the Gaṅgā etc. The *Vanaparva* of the *Mahābhārata* also extols such deaths at Prayāga.[1]

The *Salyaparva* of the *Mahābhārata*[2] states: "whoever abandons his body at Pṛthūdaka (at Pehoā near Thāneśvara) on the northern bank of the Sarasvatī after repeating Vedic prayers would not be troubled by death thereafter." The *Liṅga Purāṇa* also recommends the merit of suicide at Kurukṣetra, though Lakṣmīdhara and a few later writers do not make any mention of it. Mitra Miśra, however, refers to this passage in the *Liṅga Purāṇa* and cites it in his own work.[3] The *Anuśāsanaparva* of the *Mahābhārata* states, "if a man knowing the Vedānta and understanding the ephemeral nature of life abandons life in the holy Himālaya by fasting, he would reach the world of *Brahma*."[4]

Suicide by fire or water, and above all by *bhṛgu-patana* (falling headlong from a cliff) at Amarakaṇṭaka is highly extolled. The *Matsya Purāṇa* eulogises the peak of Amarakaṇṭaka by observing: "whoever dies at Amarakaṇṭaka by fire, poison, water or by fasting, enjoys the pleasures."[5] Moreover, he who throws

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[1] *Mbh.*, 85. 83.

[2] *Mbh.*, 39, 33-34; 81, 141-149:

सरस्वत्याश्च तीर्थानि तीर्थेभ्यश्च पृथूदकम्
श्रुतं मे सर्वतीर्थानां यस्त्यजेदात्मनस्तनुम्
पृथूदके जप्यपरो नैनं श्वोमरणं तपेत्
श्वोभाव्यपि मरणं नैनं सन्तापयेदित्यर्थः

[3] cf. *Tīrthaprakāśa*, 151. The *Liṅga Purāṇa* may be assigned to 10th-12th cent. A.D.

[4] *Mbh.*, 25. 62-64; also see *Vanaparva*, 85, 33.

[5] *Matsya Purāṇa*, 186, 28-33:

....शतं वर्षसहस्राणां स्वर्गे मोदति पाण्डव
....जीवेद्वर्षशतं साग्रं सर्वरोग विवर्जितः

himself down (from the peaks of Amarakaṇṭaka, never returns to *Saṁsāra*.[1] Lakṣmīdhara[2] and others also enumerate this kind of suicide in detail in their works. But these suicides are different from those prescribed by the smṛtis as expiation for *mahāpātakas* (great sins) since a pilgrim must already possess the moral qualities specified, which alone make his pilgrimage fruitful. Inscriptions give us instances of historical personages, who, even within a generation or two of Lakṣmīdhara, sought this release.

From ancient times Kāśī or Vārāṇasī has been the most sacred place of pilgrimage. This ancient city of the living as well as of the dying and the dead attracted numerous pilgrims from all over the country who came here to put an end to their lives in order to attain *mokṣa* by crossing the stream of the world to that of the other. By the 12th century this place had attained the position of the premier *kṣetra* in India. According to Alberuni, this city early in the eleventh century attracted anchorites in thousands from all over India.[3] It still does so. An anchorite stands less in need of pilgrimage to assist him to cross the stream of *saṁsāra* than a layman. About fifteen centuries earlier,[4] *sannyāsins* from Kāśī are said to have retired to Himālayan

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[1] *Ibid.*, 186. 34-35 :

एवं भोगान् भजन्ते वै मृता येऽमरकण्टके
अग्निप्रवेशेऽथ जले तथा चैव अनाशके
अग्निवृत्ता गतिस्तस्य पवनंस्याऽम्बरे यथा
पतनं पतते यस्तु अमरेशे नराधिपा

For details also see Vs. 10-55.

[2] *TK*, Chap. 11.

[3] Sachau, *Alberuni's India*, vol. ii, p. 146; Mitra Miśra, *Tīrtha-prakāśa*, 151.

[4] cf. *Jātaka*, Nos. 161, 165, 173, 175, 180 etc.

forests for this purpose. From the tenth century onwards, even south Indian inscriptions bear indirect testimony to the supremacy of Kāśī among holy places by regarding as "the deadliest of all sins the slaughter of Brāhmaṇas and cows at Kāśī."[1] The Purāṇas attach great importance to suicide at Kāśī. Lakṣmīdhara quotes profusely from the Purāṇas to illustrate the importance of such acts at Kāśī.[2] The means suggested are those of starvation, entering fire, drowning or self-cremation.[3] Lakṣmīdhara does not interdict such suicide as *Kalivarjya* (forbidden in the Kali age). Although scholars in general have recognised the significance of suicide at Kāśī, none the less they believe that suicide is unnecessary at Kāśī, owing to a special power conferred on this *kṣetra*. Further, it is popularly believed that Śiva himself ensures the *mukti* (salvation) of *everyone* who happens to die within the sacred limits "by whispering into the right ear of the dying person a *mantra*, which is appropriately called the Tāraka."[4] It is, therefore, natural to believe that in the face of so wide a guarantee it is futile for believers or devotees to make tedious preparations to secure the same end by baths, fasts, vows, sacrifices and prayers.

Among the Tīrthas, Prayāga is popularly known

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[1] A. S. Altekar, *History of Benares*, p. 26.

[2] vide., *TK*, chap. ii (*Vārāṇasīmāhātmyam*)

[3] Compare the following verses :

अग्निप्रवेशं ये कुर्युरविमुक्ते विधानत:
प्रविशन्ति सुखं ते मां न पुनर्भाविनो जना:
कुर्वन्त्यनशतं ये तु मद्भक्ता: कृतनिश्चया:
न तेषां पुनरावृत्ति: कल्पकोटिशतैरपि

—*Matsya Purāṇa*, 183, 75-82, 101-04. See also *TK*, p. 21.

[4] *Ibid.*, Intro., lxxvi. The *Tīrthaprakāśa* (pp. 2137-38) gives the *mantra* as follows : "ओं श्रीरामाय नम:। ओं श्री राम-राम-राम" —*Pādmottara khaṇḍa*, cited in *Śabdakalpadruma*, p. 608.

as *tīrtharāja*. Its famous *triveṇī* symbolises the confluence of three rivers, the Gaṅgā, the Yamunā and the invisible Sarasvatī. Mystic significance attaches to the union. "The triple flood reflects the union of the elements of the redeeming *Oṁkāra* or *Praṇava*, each river standing for a syllable of it."[1] It is but natural that such mighty union should have a compelling influence on the human mind. Among a people who have an oppressive sense of a destiny which ties them to an endless chain of birth and death, of joy and sorrow, a wistful feeling to find an occasion to throw away life so that its sorrows might be ended for ever, comes naturally to every one who can feel and think.[2] Prayāga is thus described in various *Purāṇas* and the later works and the epigraphic records of the early-mediaeval and mediaeval periods.

Prayāga is further noted for being the place where one is not only permitted but persuaded to commit suicide. We have already referred to a verse in the *Ṛgveda* which is cited as a sanction for this act.[3] The later writers discuss the ethics of suicide at Prayāga with

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[1] *TK*, Intro., p. lxxx; *Tristhalīsetu*, p. 8.

[2] *TK*, Intro., p. lxxix.

[3] *Supra*, pp. 46-50. Lakṣmīdhara in his *TK* has devoted a a full chapter to *Prayāgamāhātmyam* (see chap. iii, pp. 136-153); Also see *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, 105, 1-14. cf. the following verses :

व्याधितो यदि वा दीनः क्रुद्धो वापि भवेन्नरः
गङ्गायमुनामासाद्य यस्तु प्राणान् परित्यजेत्
दीप्तकांचनवर्णाभैर्पिमानैः सूर्यवर्चसैः
गन्धर्वाप्सरसां मध्ये स्वर्गे मोदति मानवः. . .
प्रयागं स्मरणाणोऽपि यस्तु प्राणान् परित्यजेत्
ब्रह्मलोकमवाप्नोति वदन्ति ऋषिपुंगवाः
सर्वकामफला वृक्षा मही यत्र हिरण्मयी
ऋषयो मुनयः सर्वे तत्र लोके स गच्छति . . (vide., *TK*, p. 138-39).

a great display of learning, but Lakṣmīdhara simply cites the authority for the act and offers no comment of his own.[1] It may be assumed that suicide at Prayāga has his approval at least for Kṣatriyas and other lower castes for it is declared as a *Kalivarjya* for only Brāhmaṇas.[2] At one place, however, the reward of suicide at the *saṅgama* is equated with that of the wise, virtuous *Yogin*,[3] i.e., to *mukti*, (salvation) while at another place it is stated to be "a long spell of existence in *svargaloka* enjoying the crude pleasures of the senses in the company of divine women till time comes to be re-born in a good family."[4] Such a person, when re-born, becomes king of Jambudvīpa or Bhāratavarṣa. Moreover, one who jumps from the sacred banyan tree (*vaṭa-vṛkṣa*) into the river below and so ends his life goes to Rudraloka.[5] The significance attached to this *vaṭa-vṛkṣa* (the *Akṣayavaṭa*) can be judged from the fact that suicide from this tree was common already in the 7th cent. A.D.[6] In some accounts the benefits of the two modes of suicides are interchanged. The number of suicides in Allahabad by jumping off this

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[1] Vācaspati Miśra, *Tīrtha-Cintāmaṇi*, pp. 47-52; Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa, *Tristhalīsetu*, pp. 46-56; Mitra Miśra, *Tīrthaprakāśa*, pp. 342-57. Mitra Miśra discusses the permissibility of suicide in general, *op. cit.*, pp. 347-55.

[2] The *Tīrthaprakāśa*, p. 354 says: "ब्राह्मणेन कलौ जलादिप्रवेशो न कार्य:"

[3] *TK*, p. 143.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 138-39:

स्त्रीसहस्राकुले रम्ये मन्दाकिन्यास्तटे शुभ....

..ततः स्वर्गात् परिभ्रष्टो जम्बूद्वीपपतिर्भवेत्....

[5] *TK*, p. 142:

वटमूलं समासाद्य यस्तु प्राणान् परित्यजेत्
सर्वलोकानतिक्रम्य रुद्रलोकं स गच्छति

[6] Beal, *Si-yu-ki*, I, p. 232.

tree became so great from a belief that Akbar had committed such suicide in a past birth and been rewarded by becoming an emperor in the next that he had the tree cut down. We have discussed this legend in detail elsewhere. Now only a stump is left. Similar post-mortuary advantages are held out for self-cremation on the sands near Prayāga, known as Ūrvaśīpulina and in the contiguous Koṭi-tīrtha. The Pātālapurī temple inside the fort is yet another place to which great sanctity is attached. From the accounts of Yuan Chwang we learn that the temple had a big premise in front of it. It was popularly believed that one who committed suicide in this temple attained heaven and enjoyed eternal pleasure. As a result of this superstitious belief, people in a large number committed suicide and heaps of bones were seen piled up over there. Nowadays this temple is beneath the earth.[1] The temple contains the images of Gaṇeśa, Viṣṇu, Dharmarāja, Anusūyā and other gods and seers. Thus, we find that Prayāga, "the king among *tīrthas*" was the greatest centre of suicides which attracted persons from all over the country to indulge in self-destruction to achieve what they desired. "In ages, where the common man was starved of sense pleasures, such appeals to the lower nature would have been even more powerful than inducements like the termination of re-incarnation."[2]

*Mahāpathayātrā* (The Great Trek) or *Mahāprasthāna* (The Great Journey) is yet another kind of highly

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[1] *Hindustan* (Hindi weekly), Feb. 7, 1954, p. 37. It is strange that Lakṣmīdhara does not refer to this temple (vide., *TK*, pp. 136-153).

[2] *TK*, Intro., p. lxxxii. According to Hindus, the great tree at Prayāga is Śiva himself: ". . महेश्वरो वटो भूत्वा तिष्ठते परमेश्वरः. ." (vide., *Ibid.*, p. 151).

commended suicide, which ends in meeting death instead of waiting for its approach. It has been included in *Tīrtha-yātrā*, which marks the culmination of a scheme of pilgrimage whose goal lies beyond all physical means of redemption and beyond life itself.[1]

*Mahāpatha*, the great road, is the euphemistic name for death, and therefore, it is forbidden to call a road *mahāpatha* during a journey as it is inauspicious.[2] The road to death is wide, very wide because every one must tread it. Death is inevitable. It does not matter whether one waits for its approach or advances to meet it half-way. Accordingly a man who awaits the slow approach of death may do so bravely or may be afraid, but a man who sets out to meet death does not lack courage. To a righteous person death has no terror: to a believer who thinks that it only opens the way to a higher life, death has no horror. To secure post-mortuary benefits and either an existence free of the misery which is the lot of man, or freedom from re-birth, *mokṣa* (liberation), is the real aim of pilgrimage, and that is also the aim of suicide in appointed ways (*vaidheya-ātmaghāta*). "He who essays the great journey....(*mahāprasthāna*)," remarks one author, "prefers to lose himself in the Himālayan snows. If the end must come through fire or water, where else could he find a fitter place to meet his death than where two mighty rivers mingle their floods, or where great streams lose themselves in the ocean."[3] In other words, it may be regarded, according to Hindu belief, as the means adopted to secure the end, namely death, and as such may be regarded as *tīrtha*. The logic advanced

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. xc.
[2] cf. *Śabdakalpadruma*—"Mahāpatha."
[3] *TK*, Intro., p. lxxix.

by the advocates of such suicides has found favour, among the later writers, only with Lakṣmīdhara whereas Mitra Miśra and others either treat of the subject in a half-hearted way or omit it altogether.

The *Mahābhārata* states that one who has realised the transitoriness of life[1] should end it in the Himālaya. The *Brahmapurāṇa* also gives the same advice, citing the instance of the Pāṇḍava brethren and Draupadī who attempted in their last journey to scale the heaven of Indra. Accordingly, the last *parva* of the *Mahābhārata* is named *svargārohaṇa*. He who is unable to make this journey to Indraloka should give up his life in the snows. When he does so, firmly rooted in truth and courage, his death immediately leads him to heaven.[2] The *Śaiva Purāṇas* unanimously advocate suicide by fire, or falling from the top of a mountain-cliff, by the ardent devotees of Śiva for obtaining for the successful suicide a post-mortuary existence of unalloyed sensual pleasure.[3] They further recommend that such a devotee should build up a great fire, and after worshipping a picture of Bhairava, offer himself as a sacrifice in that fire.[4] The special and significant feature of this form of approach to heaven is "its availability to sinners as

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[1] cf. the fcllowing verse "अध्रुवं जीवितं ज्ञात्वा. . . ." etc.

[2] *TK*, p. 258 :

महापथस्य यात्रा च कर्त्तव्याः तुहिनोपरि
आश्रित्य सत्यं धैर्यं च सद्यः स्वर्गप्रदा हि सा
(*Brahmapurāṇa* quoted)

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 262-63.

[4] *Ibid.* p. 262 :

शिवानले क्षिपेत् कायं तं पातं भैरवप्रदम्
पतङ्गादेर्यथा पाता वाऽऽत्मभातावता द्विजे
तथा ते फलदाः सर्वे क्रमतो भैरवं प्रदम्
भवनानि विचित्राणि असंख्येयानि संख्यया. . ., etc.

well as to virtuous men, to women as to men, to men of the regenerate castes as to men of no caste whatever, i.e., the outcastes."[1] The sorrow of a sinner for his moral lapses must be as intense as his faith in this form of redemption, if he is led to select it. "The spread of such beliefs was apparently helped by the anarchy engendered by the fall of great empires and the invasions of peoples hostile to Hinduism."[2]

Apart from such suicides or penances the Smṛtis also allowed a forest-hermit to start on the Great Journey to meet death. As we have shown above, they also permitted, in certain circumstances, death by entering fire, or by drowning or by throwing oneself from a precipice "even for those who were not hermits." But here again, as in the ancient Christian society, we have a divergence of opinions. The method of starting on *mahāprasthāna* and suicide by entering fire or falling from a precipice came to be strictly forbidden, by the purāṇas and later texts and was included in *Kalivarjya*.[3] Gautama[4] disfavours the idea of mourning for those who wilfully meet death by fasting or by cutting themselves off with a weapon, or by fire, or poison or water or by hanging or falling from a precipice. Atri, however, makes some exceptions. He declared: "if one who is very old (beyond 70), one cannot observe the rules of bodily purification (owing to extreme weakness

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 262 :

तेऽपि भुक्त्वा चिरं भोगांस्ते यान्ति परमं पदम्
पापोऽपि हि प्रमांस्तत्र वर्णाश्रम विवर्जित :. . ., etc.

[2] *TK*, Intro., p. xci.

[3] cf. the following verse :

महाप्रस्थानगमनं गोमेद्यश्च तथा मख:
एतां धर्मां कलियुगे वर्ज्यानाहुर्मनीषिण:

[4] *Gautama Dharma-Sūtra*, 14.11.

etc.), one who is so ill that no medical help can be given, kills himself by throwing himself from a precipice or into fire or water or by fasting, mourning should be observed for him for three days and *śrāddha* may be performed for him."[1] Aparārka, quoting from the texts of Brahmagarbha, Vivasvat and Gārgya holds the same view and adds that "by so doing he incurs no sin and his death is far better than *tapas*, and one should not desire to live vainly (without being able to perform the duties laid down by the Śāstra)."[2] He also quotes[3] several verses from *Ādipurāṇa* in support of his statement that dying by fasting, by entering fire or deep water, or by falling from a precipice or by going on *mahāprasthāna* in the Himālayas or by abandoning life from the branch of the *vaṭa* tree ("the tree of suicide") at Prayāga not only does such a man not incur sin but he attains the world of bliss. This practice reminds us of that of the Northern Indians where one-half at least of the aged persons of both sexes, when no longer capable of walking, are left alone to starve and perish from want. Also among the Californian Gallinomero this practice still exists.

Committing of suicide, as a matter of expiation for penances, was also in vogue in some form or other in Mithilā or north Bihar during the mediaeval period.

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[1] *Atri-Smṛti*, 218-19.

वृद्धः शौचस्मृतेलुप्तं प्रत्याख्यातभिषक्क्रियः।
आत्मानं घातयेद्यस्तु भृग्वग्न्यनशनाम्बुभिः॥
तस्य त्रिरात्रमाशौचं द्वितीये त्वस्थिसञ्चयम्।
तृतीये तूदकं कृत्वा चतुर्थे श्राद्धमाचरेत्॥

[2] Aparārka's commentary on *Yājñavalkya-Smṛti*, p. 536 :

"तथा च ब्रह्मगर्भः। यो जीवितुं न शक्नोति महाव्याध्युपपीड़ितः.... महाप्रस्थानगमनं ज्वलनाम्बुप्रवेशनम्। भृगुपतनं चैव वृथा नेच्छेत्तु जीवितुम्"

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 877.

We have instances, though rare, of persons committing suicide as a penance for murder and other such crimes. Acyuta Ṭhākura, son of Maheśa Ṭhākura, the founder of the Khaṇḍavalā dynasty in Mithilā (16th cent.) is said to have started on a great pilgrimage (*mahāprasthāna*) to the Himālaya (according to the Śāstric injunctions) as a penance for pillaging and murdering Amarāvatī and massacring the Brāhmaṇas thereof.[1]

Voice of protests were also uttered during the later periods. Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa[2] denounces such suicides and declares that death at Prayāga or by suicide in one of the indicated ways (referred to above) is certainly an inferior way of death, and is dictated by a desire for a definite gain (*kāmya-phala*) and not by the desire for *mokṣa*. He, therefore, compares it to the condemned *śyenayāga*, indicated for the attainment of a definite object, i.e., destruction of an enemy, but not a commendable ceremony.[3] Mitra Miśra[4] on the other hand brings such forms of suicide as falling from a cliff and self-cremation under the practices interdicted for Brāhmaṇas in *Kaliyuga*. Lakṣmīdhara underlines the practices.[5] Thus the writers of the 16th and 17th centuries, who are divided in opinion on the obligatory nature of *satī*, are united in explaining away the time-honoured forms of self-slaughter at Prayāga, in the Gaṇgā and at Kāśī. This progress of opinion against forms of religous suicides, as against *satī*, is undoubtedly noteworthy as it clearly reflects the progressive trend

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[1] vide., the author's forthcoming publication, *History of Mithilā*, Vol. II, Chaps. III & V.

[2] cf. his work *Tristhalīsetu*, pp. 290-316.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Tīrthaprakāśa* in *Vīramitrodaya*, p. 354.

[5] *TK*, chaps. 2-3, 6-7, 24 etc.

amongst a section of intellectuals who revolted against these age-old practices and conventions and denounced them as nonsensical, fanatical and purely heretical.

In the mediaeval age the position was more or less the same as in ancient times. It is boldly declared that a Brāhmaṇa attains the world of *Brahman* if he gets rid of his body through any of the means practised by ancient sages. The means prescribed are : (i) drowning oneself in a river, (ii) leaping from a height, (iii) burning, (iv) starvation etc.[1]

Thus we have mention of the practice of men committing suicide in sacred places, especially when old, noticed by Arab writers during the period. Abu Zaid records : "when a person either man or woman becomes old and the senses are enfeebled, he begs some one of his family to throw him into fire or to drown him into water."[2]

According to a tradition Kumārila, the great philosopher (8th cent. A.D.), committed suicide by burning himself on a pyre. The *Saṁkaradigvijaya* informs us that Saṁkara, when he met Kumārila as he was about to burn himself on a pyre, said : "I know, you are *Guha* or the God Kārttikeya incarnated on earth for the purpose of destroying the Buddhists who had opposed the religion of the Vedas."[3]

Kumārila's death is a subject of controversy. Some scholars hold that he learned Buddhism by representing himself to be a Buddhist, and later bitterly attacked Buddhism on all its flanks. He thus practised deception

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[1] *Manu*, VI. 31.
[2] Elliot, *History of India*, vol. i, p. 10.
[3] cf. the following verse :

श्रुत्यर्थधर्मविमुखां सुगतां निहन्तुम्
जातम् गुहम् भुवि भवन्तमहैन्न जानः

on his teachers, and it was in expiation of this great sin that he preferred such a death. Others brush aside this argument as absurd. According to them, his manner of death was the usual manner of self-immolation followed by old devout Hindus of the time. In his very old age he was probably more actuated by the religious, meritorious act than by any other consideration. Whatever the real cause, there can be no doubt about his committing suicide. This act of Kumārila, the greatest philosopher of the time, amply illustrates that suicide, on religious grounds, was widely practised during the period under review, though in later times this way of putting an end to one's life became seemingly obsolete.

From the *Āin-i-Akbarī*[1] we learn that there were five kinds of suicide held to be meritorious among the Hindus in the mediaeval age as in ancient times: (i) starving, (ii) covering oneself with cow-dung and setting fire and consuming oneself therein, (iii) burying oneself in snow, (iv) immersing oneself in the water at the extremity of Bengal "where the Ganges discharges itself into the sea through a thousand channels," enumerating one's sins, and praying till the alligators come and devour, and (v) cutting one's throat at Allahabad (Prayāga) at the confluence of the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā. To these, Ward[2] adds, drowning at Haridvāra, Allahabad and Saugor (Madhya Pradeśa); perishing in the cold of the Himālaya; the practice of dying under the wheels of Jagannātha's car at Purī; and the custom of men throwing themselves down

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[1] *Ain.* (Blochmann), vol. ii; Chevers, *op. cit.*, p. 664; Manu, vi. 31.

[2] W. Ward, *A View of the History, Literature and Religion of the Hindoos*, vol. ii, pp. 115-19; R. L. Mitra, *Indo-Aryans*, vol. ii, p. 70.

from certain rocks or tree (*vaṭa vṛkṣa* or *akṣayavaṭa* at Prayāga) to fulfil the vows of their mothers, or to receive forgiveness for sins or "to be re-born as rājās in their next stage of transmigration."[1]

In this connection William Crooke narrates a very popular and interesting legend about Akbar, the great Mughal Emperor. It is said, he "was in a former life a Brāhmaṇa named Mukunda, who carried out a course of austerities in order to induce Śiva to make him an emperor. Śiva refused to grant him his prayer, but advised him to commit suicide at Prayāga or Allahabad as a punishment for his overweening ambition. Mukunda agreed on condition that he might remember in a future birth the events of his present life. Śiva agreed and Mukunda was allowed to record his memoirs on a copperplate and bury it on the bank of the sacred river Yamunā. Years after he was re-born in the womb of Hamida, mother of Akbar, who, when he ascended the throne, went to Prayāga and dug up the plate, with the tongs, gourd, deer-skin, and other properties which Mukunda as an ascetic used."[2] It was also a custom with diseased persons to bury or drown themselves with due ceremonies in the anticipation of receiving "a happy transmigration into a healthy body."

"A new aspect of suicide," observes A. B. Keith,[3] "appears in connection with the development of the devotion paid to sectarian deities, which is characteristic of Hinduism, for suicide now (i.e., in the mediaeval age) means not so much absorption in an impersonal

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[1] Sleeman, *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official*, vol. i, p. 132; Malcolm, *Memoir of Central India*, ii, pp. 209 ff; Forsyth, *Highlands of Central India*, pp. 172 ff.

[2] William Crooke, *Religion and Folklore of Northern India*, p. 151.

[3] *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. xii, p. 35.

absolute as union with a very personal deity. The idea is reflected in the mythical account of the history of Mīrā Bāi, the devotee of Kṛṣṇa, in the time of Akbar, who is recorded to have disappeared into a fissure which showed itself for a moment in the image of her chosen divinity when she was paying homage to him at Dvārakā."[1] It may also be remarked that similar considerations probably actuated some of the comparatively rare suicides which occurred during the *Yātrā* of Viṣṇu as Jagannātha at Purī. "Neither Caitanya, to whose teaching the fame of the shrine was largely due, nor any of his followers appeared to have encouraged or approved such form of worship."[2] Moreover, Kṛṣṇadeva or Abul Fazl has made no reference to it in their elaborate accounts of the car-procession. The conception seems to have been borrowed from a Śaiva sect. Some fusion of the two sects probably took place at Purī. Caitanya's own end was somewhat mysterious. In his life-time he had sought mystic union with the God in ecstatic trance, "so that the occasional suicides of ardent devotees beneath the wheels of the car of Jagannātha can hardly be deemed unnatural or surprising."[3]

The widespread nature of the custom of dying under the wheels of the car of Jagannātha, and its prevalence "both with and without Brāhmaṇical sanction" is also attested by H.T. Colebrooke "from personal observation just at the beginning of the 19th century."[4] By this time, the practice had become so obnoxious

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 35.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 35.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 35.
[4] Colebrooke, *Miscellaneous Essays*, vol. i; Chevers, *op. cit.*, p. 664; Ward, *op. cit.*, ii, pp. 115 ff; Mitra, *op. cit.*, ii, p. 70.

that in 1802, the Legislature intervened "to prevent the practice of suicide on the island of Sāgar, at the mouth of the Ganges, where, in pursuance of vows, not only were children cast into the sea to be devoured by sharks but grown-up persons voluntarily underwent the same fate."[1] This practice was more or less confined to the lower classes. Apart from this, "men used to hurl themselves annually from a precipice in the mountains south of Narmadā, sacred to Kālabhairo (Kāla Bhairava), in fulfilment of vows undertaken at an earlier period."[2] A.B. Keith has given a beautiful description of how this terrible rite was carried out by mountaineers : "Great concourses gathered at the place on new moon of phālguna, the day appointed for the ceremony, and it is significant of the passion for public recognition as part of the motive of such suicides that the man meditating this fate was wont to proclaim his intention publicly, and attended by a band of musicians to promenade in the neighbouring towns collecting alms."[3] The way these rites were performed shows that sometimes people had greater charm for death than for life itself, and that such an end was rather a matter of rejoicing to the perpetrators of self-destruction as well as to the spectators.

Not only did the practice of *satī* flourish under the Brāhmaṇical auspices, but also the custom of suicide "by drowning at the especially holy spot of the junction of the Yamunā and the Ganges was approved, while the practice of lepers consenting to burial alive was promoted by the grant of obsequies which were other-

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[1] A.B. Keith, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. xii, p. 35.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 35.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 35.

wise denied"[1] during the 18th and 19th centuries. During this time and after, cutting throat before the image of Bhavānī in the temple of Vindhyavāsinī near Mirzapur (U.P.) was also a popular practice with the Śaivas. Interference with these rites was gradual, but the final adoption of the principle of treating participation in a ritual suicide as a criminal offence, has deprived the act much of its religious character, though it is of-course impossible to prevent suicide on the part of those who regard such a fate "as a logical outcome of the religious convictions" they hold.

*Historical instances* :

Literature and epigraphy supply some very significant historical examples of the practice of religious suicide. The *Mṛcchakaṭika*[2] (of Gupta times) speaks of king Śūdraka as having entered fire. The *Raghuvaṁśa*[3] (of Gupta times) also poetically describes how Aja, in his old age, when his health was shattered by disease, resorted to fasting and drowned himself at the confluence of the holy rivers, the Gaṅgā and the Sarayū, and "immediately attained the position of a denizen of heaven." Kumāragupta, the later Gupta Emperor (c. 554 A.D.) is also said to have entered fire of dried cowdung cakes.[4] According to some scholars, this

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 35.

[2] *Mṛcchakaṭika*, 1.4.

[3] *Raghu.*, VIII. 94 :

सम्यग्विनीतमथ वर्महरं कुमार—
मादिश्य रक्षणविधौ विधिवत्प्रजानाम् ।
रोगोपसृष्टतनुदुर्वसतिं मुमुक्षुः
प्रायोपवेशनमतिर्नृपतिर्बभूव ॥

[4] *CII*, vol. iii, No. 42 :

शौर्यसत्यव्रतधरो यः प्रयागगतो घने
अम्भसीव करीषाग्नौ मग्नः स पुष्पपूजितः (Lines 7-8, p. 203).

necessarily does not imply that the emperor voluntarily embraced death by fire. "But it appears," observes P. V. Kane, "that there is no great propriety in the description if all that is meant is that the Emperor's corpse was burnt with *karīṣa*."[1]

Fleet takes this verse to indicate that Kumāra-Gupta's funeral rites took place at Allahabad but not necessarily that he placed himself on the funeral pyre while still alive.[2] K. C. Chattopadhyaya does not accept this suggestion and holds that Kumāragupta burnt himself alive.[3] We are inclined to hold the latter view as the verse in question also seems to suggest the same. This view is further strengthened by the fact that this mode of suicide is regarded as most meritorious in the Purāṇas.[4]

From the Khairha plates of Yaśaḥkarṇadeva (Kalacuri Saṁvat 823, i.e., A.D. 1073) we know that king Gāṅgeya, "when fond of residing at the foot of the holy fig tree (*Akṣayavaṭa*) at Prayāga, found salvation there together with his hundred wives at the famous banyan tree of Prayāga[5] in A. D. 1040. Jayapāla, king of Kabul and Lahore is also said to have entered fire in 1001 A.D.[6]

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[1] Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, vol. iv, p. 605, note 1372.
[2] Fleet, *CII*, III, p. 203.
[3] *JUPHS*, X, pp. 60 ff.
[4] The *Matsya Purāṇa*, cvii, says:

गंगायमुनयोर्मध्ये कर्षाग्नियस्तुसाधयेत् ।
अहीनांगो ह्यरोगश्च पंचेन्द्रियसमन्वितः ॥
यावन्ति रोमकूपाणि तस्य गात्रेषु देहिनः ।
तावद्वर्षसहस्राणि स्वर्गलोके महीयते ॥

[5] *EI*, XII, p. 211 : प्राप्ते प्रयागवटमूलनिवेस(श) व(ब)न्धौसाद्धंशतेन गृहिणीभिरमुत्रमुक्तिम्; Also cf. Jabalpur Inscription of Yaśaḥkarṇa-deva (*EI*, II, pp. 1-7)
[6] *TK*, p. 259.

The Candella king Dhaṅgadeva (1001-02 A.D.) also committed suicide at Prayāga. It is said that Dhaṅga, after living for more than hundred years at last "abandoned the body in the waters of the Gaṅgā and Yamunā and entered into beatitude, closing the eyes, fixing his thoughts on Rudra and muttering holy prayers."[1] The Candella minister Ananta also drowned himself at the confluence at Prayāga.[2] In this connection it is important to note that some mediaeval writers[3] prohibit suicide by Brāhmaṇas at Prayāga. The *Tīrthaprakāśa* holds a long, learned and highly polemic discussion on the subject of religious suicide at Prayāga, referred to above. Its own view appears to be that a Brāhmaṇa should not commit suicide at Prayāga on account of prohibition contained in *Kalivarjya* verses and that members of other varṇas may do so.[4] But the example of the Brāhmaṇa minister Ananta, clearly indicates that there was no such prohibition in earlier times, or even if there was any, it was never strictly followed or enforced.

We have also some evidence for the suicide of Vallālasena, the Sena king. In the *Adbhutasāgara*, the royal author (i.e, Vallālasena) has been described as having drowned himself at Prayāga.[5] But this tradition is doubtful, as the compilation of *Dānasāgara* in 1091 Śaka militates against the statement that Vallālasena committed suicide in 1089 Śaka.[6]

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[1] *EI*, I, p. 137, verse 55.

[2] cf. "Maucandella Ins. of Madanavarman" in *EI*, I, p. 200-1. Verse 29 says that Ananta was a Brāhmaṇa.

[3] cf. The *Tīrthaprakāśa* (vide., Kane, *op. cit.*, IV, p. 609).

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] also see *JUPHS*, vol. vi (N.S.), pts. i-ii, p. 32.

[6] *IB*, 174. cf. the following verse:

ग्रन्थेस्मिन्नसमाप्त एव तनये साम्राज्यलक्ष्मींमुदा
दीक्षापर्वणि दक्षिणे निगकृते निष्पत्तिस्थापयत्

The Rāṣṭrakūṭa king Dhruva is also said to have committed suicide at Prayāga. But the evidences relating to this episode are not very certain. The Baroda copperplate of Karka Suvarṇavarṣa says: "Dhruva obtaining from his enemies, at the confluence of the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā of beauteous waves, the status of an overlord, attained at the same time the high region of Śiva as a direct mark as it were (of his elevated condition)."[1] Prinsep interpreted this verse to mean that Dhruva drowned himself at the confluence of the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā.[2] Altekar, however, rejected this view and held that the verse need not be construed to mean the suicide of Dhruva at the confluence, as it describes figuratively the occupation of Doāb by the Rāṣṭrakūṭa invader.[3] K. C. Chattopadhyaya rejects this view and says: "The Purāṇas mention that the death near the famous banyan tree at Prayāga takes one to the region of Śiva. I have, therefore, no hesitation in rejecting the suggestion of Dr. A. S. Altekar that the verse has to be interpreted as referring to Dhruva's occupation of the Gaṅgā-Yamunā-Doāb. His further statement that the poet imagines that the acquisition of heaven by Dhruva, which is mentioned in the latter half of the verse was due to 'his possession of the holy Yamunā and the Gaṅgā,' is quite absurd. Nobody can possess the

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नानादानतिलाम्बुसम्बलनभं सूर्यात्मजासंगमं
गंगायां विरचय्य निर्जरपुरं भार्यानुयातो गतः

[1] *IA*, XII, p. 159. cf. the following verse:
यो गंगायमुने तरंगसुभगे गृह्णन् परेभ्यः समं
साक्षाच्चिह्नभेन चोत्तमपदं तत्प्राप्तवानैश्वरम्
देहासम्मित वैभवैरिव गुणैर्यस्य भ्रमद्भिर्दिशो
व्याप्तास्तस्य वभूव कीर्त्तिपुरुषो गोविन्दराजः सुतः

[2] *JASB*, 1839, p. 304.

[3] *The Rāṣṭrakūṭas and their Times*, p. 58.

Yamunā and the Gaṅgā. And how can possession of the contiguous land take him to heaven either ?"[1]

The above arguments are also quite defective and weak. Epigraphic evidences of the period suggest otherwise. The Prince of Wales Museum Copperplate of Cālukya Vijayāditya speaks of "the bringing of the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā under the suzerainty of his father,"[2] and "the defeat of the King of Uttarāpatha brought him the insignia of overlordship."[3] "The status of an overlord" (*aiśvaraṁ uttamapadaṁ*) of the former may be compared with "the insignia of overlordship" (*parameśvara-ciñha*) of the latter.

The verse in Baroda copperplate gives two meanings—(i) one in favour of Śiva and (ii) the other in case of Dhruva. *Īśvara* is one of the names of Śiva and Gaṅgā and Yamunā are represented as being his doorkeepers. *Uttama-pada* is the high position of Devadeva. *Uttamapadaṁ aiśvaraṁ*, therefore, means overlordship (of Dhruva) which is indicated by the fact that the Gaṇgā and the Yamunā were under his jurisdiction. And, lastly "the possession of the contiguous land, has not taken Dhruva to heaven," but has certainly given some ground to the poet for figuratively stating that Dhruva obtained the great position of *aiśvaraṁ*, i.e., overlordship and the nature of Śiva, simultaneously.[4] In view of the above arguments, it can be said for cer-

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[1] *JUPHS*, X, p. 175.

[2] *EI*, XXV, lines 22-23 :

"गंगायमुनापालिध्वजपटहढकमहाशब्दचिह्नमाणिक्यमतगजादीन् पितृसात्कुर्वन्"

[3] *Ibid.*, lines 17-18 :

"सकलोत्तरापथनाथमथनोपार्जितोर्जितपालिध्वजादिसमस्त — पारमेश्वर्यचिह्नस्य"

[4] *JUPHS*, VI (N.S.), pts. i-ii, p. 33.

tain that Dhruva drowned himself at the confluence.

Further we are told that Karṇadeva of Cedi (A.D. 1042) had ended his life in its waters.[1] The Khajurāho Inscription narrates that king Dhaṅgadeva of the Candella dynasty lived for more than hundred years and abandoned his body at Prayāga while contemplating on Rudra.[2] We have yet another instance of the Cālukya king Someśvara Āhavamalla who, after performing *Yoga* rites, drowned himself in the Tuṅgabhadrā river in A.D. 1068 and thus "went to *svarga*."[3]

In the Arkalgud Taluq in the Hassan district in Mysore State were discovered two inscriptions which record two instances of friends having thrown themselves into the fire for their late masters. A third case is given in an inscription in Kadur (A.D. 1180). The governor of Āsandināḍ died, or, as the inscription has it, "laid siege to Indra's Amarāvatī." On this Bammayya Nāyaka, the slave of Sankamale, "shewed the way to Svarga." The next instance, Maśaṇayya's younger brother Boppaṇṇa, "making good his world for the occasion" went to heaven on the death of Tailapa, the ruler of Banāvasi & etc. in 1030 A.D.[4] What the occasion was and why he took this vow is not vouchsafed to us. Perhaps it was a vow that the minister's brother took to show his attachment to his sovereign. Such vows once made were apparently *not* merely expected to be carried out, but sometimes the votary was asked

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[1] *Ibid*, Intro, lxxx-lxxxi.

[2] *EI*, vol. i, p. 140: ". . . .स्त्रीरत्नम् भुवनैकभूषणमभूत्तेनेयमेका सती . . . ." etc.

[3] *Epigraphia Carnatica*, vol. ii, verse 136. Mr. Rice has collected a number of inscriptions on these memorial-stones in the volumes of this journal.

[4] *IA*, XXXV, pp. 129-30.

to make good his *word*.[1] Besides, we have numerous instances recording a vow taken even without a personal motive. In A.D. 1123, during the reign of Vikramāditya VI, his governor of Banavasi was Ramayya. The *Māhāsāmanta* Bopparasa and his wife Siriyā Devī, surrounded by all the subjects, were in the temple at the rice-fields. The cowherd Māraṇa's son Dekī Nāyaka made a vow, saying: "if the king obtains a son, I will give my head to swing on the pole for the God of Koṇḍaśabhāvi....."[2] This record is interesting as we have here another vow made from an entirely different motive. Votive offerings of the nature of the foregoing are made nowadays also, but by the person who is the direct recipient of the favour sought. This case is, however, peculiar in view of the fact that the vow was taken, not by the party directly concerned, but by a friend.

In the fifth year of Tribhuvanamalla Vīra Someśvara, i.e., A.D. 1185, his senior queen Lachchala Devī went to heaven. Boka, an officer of the king, had previously taken a vow—"I will die with the Devī." "On his master calling him, saying, 'you are the brave man who with resolution has spoken of taking off your head,' with no light courage, Boka gave his head, while the world applauded saying, 'he did so at the very instant.' The word spoken with full resolve is not to be broken."

The next instance records a vow, taken even without a personal motive as in the preceding cases. A certain Tuluva, Caṇḍiya, took a vow "not to let his finger-nails grow," apparently, if the Banavāsi fort should be disposed of in a manner he did not approve

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 130.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 130.

of. It so happened that Ballavarasa and Satyāśraya Deva jointly made a grant of the fort and the temple endowment in the twelve-thousand century. Upon this the Tuluva, Candiya, "cutting off the finger with which he had given at the Permālu temple and climbing the Bherundeśvara Pillar leaped upon the point of a spear and gained the world of gods."[1] This and the practice of dying at *vaṭa* tree at the confluence of the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā were famous and are mentioned by Al-Beruni[2] and other Arab writers, noted above. His statement that "burning oneself is forbidden to Brahmins and Ksatriyas by a special law; they, therefore, drown themselves in the Ganges,"[3] is undoubtedly remarkable. According to C. V. Vaidya, this so-called special law probably refers to the *Kalivarjya* provision on the subject.[4] This rule, if strictly interpreted, would probably mean that suicide of old men and others by falling into the fire or from precipices was prohibited; and would leave the permission to throw oneself in a river intact. There is thus here a clear reference in Al-Beruni to a *Kalivarjya* provision.

In the Southern Marāṭhā country Jainism was much popular. The Gaṅga kings in Mysore were themselves Jainas. Indra IV, the last representative of the Rāṣṭrakūṭa line and son of Kṛṣṇa II by a Western Gaṅga princess, was a devout Jaina. After the overthrow of the Rāṣṭrakūṭa power by the later Cālukyas, the last representative as a devout Jaina killed himself by *sallekhana*, a Jaina vow, discussed in detail in the following pages. We have numerous instances of

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 130
[2] Chap. LXV, p. 158 : Sachau, vol. ii.
[3] *Ibid.*
[4] cf. the following : "भृग्वग्निपतनैश्चैव वृद्धादिमरणम् तथा...."

Jainas performing this act of *sallekhana* which is nothing but death caused by starvation. In this ceremony men and women alike took part and devoted themselves to contemplation of the divinity for days without food or water. The Śravaṇa Belagolā records are full of such instances. The popularity of this practice is attested throughout the whole history of Jainism : in A.D. 1172 thus died the great scholar and statesman Hemacandra followed shortly by his patron Kumārapāla.[1] The Kālandrī (Sirohī State) inscription records the suicide of a Jaina congregation by fasting in Śaka 1389,[2] i.e., A. D. 1311.

*Suicide among the Jainas and the Buddhists.*

While the majority of the sects were addicted to speedy methods of suicide, the Jainas and probably also the Ājīvikas who were disciples of Gosāla, considered those methods vulgar and evil.[3] According to them, men who thus kill themselves are re-born as demons.[4] While practising starvation the Jaina must avoid any desire for death (*maraṇāśaṁsā*) : "Renouncing all food and death, I patiently wait for my end."[5]

While Buddhism condemns asceticism, the Jainas and many others saw in it and physical pain (*duḥkha, tapas*) a force that makes for purification from sin. Thus suicide by starvation is the ascetic act *par excel-*

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[1] *History of Dharmaśāstra*, vol. ii (Suicide), also see the author's paper, "Suicide in Mediaeval India" in *CPJ*, vol. ii, No. 2 (1954), pp. 1-9.

[2] *EI*, XX, App., p. 98, No. 691.

[3] *Kathākoṣa* (tr. C.H. Tawney), London, 1895, p. 8.

[4] The *giripatana* or *bhṛgupatana* is *pāgayajanaceṭṭhiya* (H. Jacobi, *Erzahlungen in Mahārāṣṭri*, Leipzig, 1886, p. 2; A. Weber, *Frag., ment der Bhagavati*, Berlin, 1865-66, p. 206).

[5] On Jaina suicides, see J. J. Meyer, *Hindu Tales*, trans. Eng- London, 1909; *Uvāsagadasāo* (ed. Hoernle), pp. 57, 89; *Ācārāṅgasūtra*, i, 7, 5-8 (*SBE*, xxii, 74-78); Hopkins, *The Religions of India*, 291; Bühler, *Ueber die indische Sekte der Jaina* (Vienna, 1887), p. 2.

*lence*.[1] It is further declared that vocal sins are destroyed through silence (*mauna*) and mental sins through 'respiratory-restraint,' but bodily sins through starvation (*abhojana*)[2] and lust through mortification. At this supreme moment of his career the asectic must not long after re-birth in this world or as a god; he must not wish to live on or desire sensual pleasures, but equally he must not seek for death to come more swiftly. The final condition thus reached by the sage (*samāhipatte*) is one of complete mental and physical collapse. Practically identical with it appears to be the *pannabhūmi*, the last of the eight stages of man's existence as taught by Maṅkhaliputta Gosāla.[3]

Thus, among the Jainas a similar rule, i.e., death by fasting, prevailed. The Tīrthaṅkaras exhorted their followers to shun all luxuries and take to most rigorous austerities in life. Death by fasting was given a high place in the Jaina canon. It frankly recognises and recommends religious suicide. It is dealt with at length in *Āyāra*, the first *Aṅga*. The *Ratnakaraṇḍa Śrāvakācāra*[4] of Sāmantabhadra (c. 2nd cent. A. D.) "dilates on *sallekhana* which consists in abandoning the body for the accumulation of merit in calamities, famines, extreme old age and incurable disease."[5]

But, then, suicide is not allowed to one and all. It is allowed only to those ascetics who have acquired the highest degree of perfection. "It, in essence, con-

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[1] Meyer, *op. cit.* : "Violent death, voluntary or not, destroys sin."

[2] *Majjhima*, i, 93; *SBE*, i and vols. xxii-xlv.

[3] *Pārājika*, iii; *SBE*, xiii. 4; Buddhaghoṣa's comm. on *Dīgha-Nikāya*, ii, 20.

[4] Chap. V.

[5] cf. the following : "उपसर्गे दुर्भिक्षे जरसि रुजायां च निःप्रतीकारे। धर्माय तनुविमोचनमाहुः सल्लेखनामार्याः (*Ibid.*, Chap. V.)

sists of giving up begging, and lying down in a duly chosen place to await death by hunger and thirst," i.e., by *sallekhana*. Tīrthaṅkaras, Pārśva and Ariṣṭanemi, monk Khandaga and layman Ambada, to mention a few, practised such a kind of suicide. The *Uvāsagadasāo* is full of such stories. But, it does not permit suicide to others than the ascetics, and non-religious suicide is regarded with special horror by the Jainas as they disapprove of all taking of life.

The Buddhists were entirely opposed to this practice of achieving *nirvāṇa*. From the Makhādeva and Lomahaṁsa Jātakas we learn the futility of ascetic self-mortification. The Buddha himself all through his preachings condemned this practice as absurd and delusory. It is true, they allow a man under certain circumstances to take his own life, but at the same time they maintain that generally dire miseries are in store for the self-murderer and look upon him as one who must have sinned deeply in a former state of existence.[1]

Notwithstanding the opposition of the Buddha, the Buddhist literature is full of various kinds of suicide. The *Majjhima Nikāya*[2] says that a husband threatened with separation from his wife, kills her and commits suicide in order that they may be united as husband and wife in their next birth. But considering the stand taken by Buddhism on suicide the Buddhist texts contain some paradoxical statements. At one place it condemns suicide in a strong language but at another it indirectly supports it. It condemns asceticism and forbids any austerity which is likely to weaken both body and mind, and at the same time it strongly condemns suicide. It declares in unequivocal terms that

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[1] Hardy, *Manual of Buddhism*, p. 479.
[2] *Majjhima Nikāya*, ii, 109.

"a monk who preaches suicide, who tells man : 'Do away with this wretched life, full of suffering and sin : death is better,' in fact preaches murder, is a murderer, is no longer a monk."[1]

The underlying spirit of Buddhism and its philosophy may be seen in the fact that Buddhists object to both "thirst for existence" (*bhavatṛṣṇā*) and "thirst for non-existence" (*vibhavatṛṣṇā*). Accordingly a saint must abide in indifference "without caring for life, without caring for death." A monk or follower is explicitly told that he would not commit suicide in order to reach *nirvāṇa* sooner. In spite of these strong strictures against suicides or self-immolation, we have, none the less, a number of stories recorded in Buddhist scriptures which prove beyond doubt that Buddhism in certain cases and in certain circumstances admitted suicide. In some cases it may be premature and sinful, but in other cases we find *arhats* indulging in self-destruction. The stories relating to suicides of Sīhā, Sappadāsa, Vakkali and Godhika amply bear out our view.

(i) Sīhā was distressed at not obtaining spiritual progress after seven years of endeavour. She said : "What have I to do with this wretched life (*pāpajīvita*) ? I will die through hanging ! But, just as the rope was tied round her neck, she was turning her thought towards enlightenment (*vipasannā*) as was her former habit. She attained *arhatship*, and at this very moment the rope loosened from her throat and fell.[2]

(ii) The story of Sappadāsa informs us that the monk (Sappadāsa) was overpowered by passion (*kilesa*) and never obtained concentration. This distressed

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[1] *SBE*, xiii, 4; *Pārājika*, iii.
[2] *Therīgāthā*, 77.

him so much that he was about to commit suicide with a razor or a sword when he suddenly realized the inward vision.[1]

(iii) Vakkali was fond of looking at the Buddha, and the excessive importance which he attached to the physical body—a putrid body (*pūtikāya*)—of the Master was an obstacle to his spiritual advance. In order to create in him a 'holy fear' (*saṁvega*), the Buddha commanded him to go. Desperate at being no longer able to see the Master, Vakkali decided to commit suicide by throwing himself down from a mountain, saying: "What have I to do with this life, if I can no longer see Him?" At this moment the Master appeared and prevented him from thus 'destroying the conditions of his reaching the Path' (*maggaphala*).[2]

(iv) Vakkali was suffering from a painful illness. Bhagavat came to comfort him and said: "Your death will be a holy one, an auspicious one (*apāpika*)." When the Master had gone, Vakkali uttered for the last time the Buddhist profession of faith (universal transitoriness) and took the sword.[3]

(v) Godhika was unable, because of disease, to remain in a certain state of meditation. He thought: "If I were to take a sword..." Māra approached the Buddha and told him: "your disciple wants to die; he has resolved to die, prevent him. How could one of your disciples die while he is not yet an *arhat*?" But, as it is explained in the *Abhidharmakośavyākhyā*, Godhika reached *arhatship* just after he had begun cutting his throat.[4] It is said: "Those who take the

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[1] *Theragāthā*, 408.

[2] *Ibid.*, 350; *Dhammapada's Commentary*, 381; *Aṅguttara's Commentary*.

[3] *Saṁyutta*, iii, 123.

[4] *Kathāvatthu*, i, 2.

sword are without regard for life; they achieve insight (*vipassanā*) and reach *nirvāṇa*. Thus act the strong ones (*dhīra*); they desire not life; having removed thirst and the root of thirst (that is ignorance), Godhika is at rest."[1]

Vakkali was an *arhat* but possessed not the power of "loosening the *saṁskāras* of life" and had to take the sword in order to die. On the other hand, we are told that Śākyamuni and a number of saints, including Mahāpajāti Gotamī, possessed such power. Śākyamuni had, therefore, a voluntary death. As Mahāpajāti had to obtain permission of Śākyamuni before she resolved to die, hers was a voluntary death, though of a slightly different character. The *Pratyekabuddhas*, like Śākyamuni, decided for themselves when the *time* came and, rising a few cubits above the ground, burned themselves.

Mahāyāna both praises and deprecates suicide as self-surrender and worship. The saint of neo-Buddhism (New Buddhism) believed in "abandoning one's existence" as the best sacrifice, for "to burn one's body as an offering is certainly more meritorious than to kindle lamps at shrine." The stories of a future Śākyamuni[2] who gave his body to feed a starving tigress and the legend of Bhaiṣajyarāja,[3] who filled his body with all sorts of cil and set it on fire are worth recording in this connection. This reminds us of the popular legend of Dadhīcī who offered up his bones to God Indra to prepare *vajra* (the terrible thunder-bolt) to fight against

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[1] The *Milindapañha* also deals with suicide (*SBE*, xxxv, pp. 273ff), but does not mention Godhika and Vakkali, *Saṁyutta*, i, 120; iii, 123; *Dhammapada's Commentary*, v. 57 (i. 431); *Kathāvatthu's Commentary*, ad. i.2.

[2] *Jātakamālā*, i, (tr. Speyer), *SBE*, i.

[3] *Saddharma puṇḍarīka*, xxii (tr. Kern), *SBE*, xxi.

the Rākṣasas (demons) and kill them. It was perhaps in accordance with the principles of new Buddhism that self-surrender culminating in voluntary death has been held in honour in various Buddhist countries.

Megasthenes[1] records a very interesting story in his book. From the account he has given of the death of Kalanos, the Indian gymnosophist, at the age of 73, who burnt himself over a pyre in the camp of Alexander the Great, we can safely infer that the practice of religious suicide prevailed long before the 4th cent. B. C. In the accounts recorded by Strabo we have another story of the same nature. "With the ambassadors that came to Augustus Caesar from India (20 B. C.) also arrived an Indian gymnosophist who committed himself to the flames like Kalanos who exhibited the same spectacle before Alexander."[2]

According to I-tsing, the Chinese traveller, Indian Buddhists abstained from suicide and, in general, from self-torture.[3] But one of the chief aims of Śāntidāsa in his *Śikṣā-samuccaya*[4] ("A Compendium of the Rules of the Disciple of the Great Vehicle") is to show that the sacrifice of one's body is not in accordance with a wise estimate of the spiritual needs of a beginner.

From the above accounts it is clear that religious suicide was approved in India since long. But the most significant point to remember is that only those persons who lived life fully and acquired high ascetic power were authorised to undertake this act. To others not possessed of the requisite merits or qualifications this

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[1] MacCrindle, p. 106; Arrian, *Anab.*, vii, 3.
[2] Strabo, xv, i, p. 720.
[3] *A Record of the Buddhist Religion*, pp. 197 ff.
[4] *Bibliotheca Buddhica*, i (Petrograd, 1902).

right was generally denied. But, there is comparatively little distinction between "the practice of austerities to a pitch which deprives the ascetic of all mental and physical activity," and "the actual termination of life; an intermediate stage is furnished by the cataleptic condition which the Yogi seeks to induce." Of this, the most famous case is that of Haridāsa who even survived burial for considerable periods. Right from the age of the *Ṛgveda* down to the present day, an aged man has been exhorted, through one doctrine or other, to take it as his duty and privilege to adopt a hermit's life, unless he preferred to terminate of his own will an existence which had become burdensome. This was probably sought as an alternative to the violent removal of the elders. The longevity of this character of suicide (i.e., *sallekhana*,) is proved conclusively "by the pertinacity with which the Jainas have maintained it from the earliest period. In 1912, a monk at Ahmedabad though in perfect health, starved himself to death by a fast of 41 days. In the following year (1913) again a nun at Rajkot "having previously weakened herself by austerities died by two or three days' fast."[1] This and other suicidal practices are now almost extinct.

## Modes and Methods

From the discussion of suicides in general we now pass on to the elaboration of different modes and methods which were employed by persons indulging in self-destruction from ancient times to the modern period. We need hardly add here that all these modes and methods have already been referred to in the course of our general discussion of suicides in different ages. But we feel that it would be better if we summarise

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[1] *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. xii, p. 34.

them below for the benefit of the general readers. Let us, however, bear in mind that there have been few, rather very few changes in the prevalent modes and methods employed for suicide throughout the ages. They may be summarised as follows :

### (*i*) Drowning

Formerly, i.e., in the ancient and mediaeval periods it bore a religious tinge as people used to commit suicide by drowning themselves at the confluence of the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā at Prayāga to attain *mokṣa* or *nirvāṇa*, but nowadays it is very frequent among young men and girls, especially due to frustration in love-affairs.

### (*ii*) Hanging and Poisoning

It is very common in both the sexes—males as well as females. As Rai Bahadur Jai Singh P. Modi[1] has shown, blindness or age is no bar to suicidal hanging. A blind man of 75 committed suicide by suspending himself from the branch of a tree in Lucknow a few years ago.[2] Hanging sometimes is adopted as a last resort, after other forms of suicide, viz., cutting of the throat, indigestion of poison etc., have failed to produce the desired effect. In December 1916, a Hindu girl aged 16, first took poison, then tried to cut her throat and lastly gathering courage hanged herself.[3]

### (*iii*) Burning

Burning is resorted to by setting fire to clothes, soaked in kerosene oil—a very common method usually adopted by young girls or women these days, especially unmarried Hindu girls, as an escape from the prevalent

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[1] *Medical Jurisprudence and Toxicology*, p. 159.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 159.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 159.

dowry system affecting most of the parents. Some times men also take to this method. A case occurred at Hapur (U.P.) where a treasurer of the local branch of the Imperial Bank of India (Now the State Bank of India) committed suicide at midnight by putting himself on a pyre of charcoal and wood and throwing kerosene oil on it and then setting fire to it.[1] We have yet other instances which show how young girls and boys resort to this crude method for petty and trifling causes :

(i) "Nawada (Gaya), June 16—It is said that a young girl of 18 of village Mohuar in the Nawada P. S. committed suicide by setting fire to her person. The young girl is said to have fallen unconscious owing to the intense flames and was rushed to the Nawada Hospital in a very serious condition where she expired."[2]

(ii) "Bhabhua, June 16—It is said that a nephew of an employee of the Bhabhua Town Out-agency sprinkled kerosene oil over his body and set fire to it. When it became intolerable he came out of his house and started running restlessly on the road. People around extinguished the fire with great difficulty and sent the boy to Hospital where he died. The cause of this suicide is not known."[3]

### (*iv*) Shooting

Shooting oneself with revolver or gun is more common as a mode of suicide among the Europeans and the Anglo-Indians and is occasional among the Indians.[4] Bishwambhar Choudhary, a Collector of Bihar, resorted

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[1] *The Leader*, Allahabad, March 7, 1934.
[2] *Aryavarta*, Patna, June 19, 1960.
[3] *Ibid.*, June 19, 1960.
[4] We have also references to shooting as a mode of suicide in the *Yamasmṛti*, verse 22.

to this method to escape a so-called infamy a few years back and shot himself with a pistol.

We have yet another instance which is more glaring in its form:

"Dalsinghsarai (Darbhanga), July 9 — Mahbur Rahman, an armed constable of this Police Station ran to a square near the Thana last morning at about 8.30, and killed himself by firing a shot at his throat.

"While on duty from eight in the morning, police said, the constable suddenly jumped from the verandah and fired at a police-officer and a Jamadar. The shot, however, hit the wall. He fired another shot at the Police quarters, that too struck the wall.

"Then, before the stupefied policemen, he ran to the square and shot at himself.....

"Higher authorities have taken up investigation into the matter."[1]

Another report says that he resorted to this extreme method due to "frustration in love-rivalry."[2]

### (*v*) Starving

It is a means of committing suicide often resorted to by political prisoners or leaders in India by taking recourse to hunger-strike. This is also adopted by the ascetics, specially the Jainas (cf. *sallekhana*), of which we have given several instances in the preceding pages.

### (*vi*) Placing or throwing oneself on the Railway Line

This method is often employed by students who do not succeed in the examination and sometimes also by frustrated and dejected lovers and financially dis-

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[1] *The Indian Nation*, Patna, July 10, 1960.
[2] *The Searchlight*, Patna, July 14, 1960.

tressed persons, as is amply illustrated by the following instances :

(i) "Nawada, Feb. 27—An unidentified young woman is reported to have committed suicide the other day by throwing herself before a running train. It is said that she was moving by the side of the track near Wazirganj Railway Station and when the train reached near her, she threw herself before the engine and met instantaneous death. The dead body remained under the custody of the G. R. P. Domestic quarrel is said to be the cause of her death."[1]

(ii) "Deoghar, June 18—It is said that a 40-year-old man committed suicide by throwing himself down a running train near the Jasidih Railway Station. The Police are investigating into the case."[2]

### (*vii*) Stabbing

This brute method requires boldness and courage, and only a determined suicide adopts it by stabbing on the region of his heart or on the neck. Such cases are rare.

Very often young girls and boys resort to this crude method for trifling or no cause at all under momentary impulse when they are not allowed to have their way in life. The following case is a terrible instance in point :

"Parasa (Saran), June 17—It is reported that yesterday a young girl of village Kakarharsaw attempted to commit suicide by stabbing herself.

"It is said that her husband is an employee in Patna and the girl (his wife) also expressed her desire to live there along with her husband. The husband, however,

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[1] *The Searchlight* (Dak Ed.), Feb. 29, 1956.
[2] *Sanmarg*, Calcutta, June 19, 1954.

did not agree as there was no one else at his village-home to look after his ailing mother. This infuriated the girl so much that she attempted to take away her life. She is, however, improving now."[1]

### (*viii*) Cutting the throat

This is resorted to with a light sharp cutting weapon, such as a razor or a knife and is nct uncommon. This is perhaps the most brutal method of putting an end to one's life. This is practised mainly by males. On the basis of the available statistics, sociologists have shown that girls often avoid such methods that involve spilling of blood. In June 1915, a Hindu male, aged 22, committed suicide by cutting his throat with a dagger. We have another example of a Muslim male, aged 60. On August 27, he was admitted to King George's Hospital at Lucknow, as a case of suicide with multiple injuries inflicted with a razor. We have yet another recent instance, reported from Uttara Pradesh :

"Allahabad, June 10—A gentleman from a noble family in Ghazipur, while being shaved, snatched away the razor from the barber's hand and ran away. He then started cutting his own throat. People rushed to get hold of him but he had cut his throat half through by then. On his way to hospital he succumbed. It is said that for some time past he was not in his senses and often indulged in unnatural acts."[2]

### (*ix*) Falling or jumping from a precipice

It is not an unusual mode of suicide, but sometimes it so happens that the body of a murdered person is placed in such a position as to avoid suspicion of

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[1] *Aryavarta*, Patna, June 20, 1960.
[2] *Amrita Patrika* (Hindi), Allahabad, June 11, 1954.

homicide. During the last few years 4 to 6 such cases of suicide by jumping down from big buildings occurred in Calcutta. The following instance is reported from Surat (Bombay) :

"Surat, June 9—It is said, a 52-year-old gambler, Nagin Das Tribhuvan Das, committed suicide by jumping down from his two-storeyed-building. While making a search of his house, the Police party seized some articles and a bottle of wine. Nagin Das went upstairs along with the Police party, but as they were coming down, he went to the verandah pretending to close the doors and then jumped down."[1]

As we have already shown above, most of these methods are quite old—as old as the story of suicide itself, and have been resorted to all through the ages. There are of course a few methods, such as hanging and poisoning, burning (other than entering the fire in case of religious suicides), shooting, placing or throwing oneself on the Railway line, stabbing and cutting one's throat, which are the legacy of the modern western civilization and the deadly result of the two consecutive World Wars.

## Punishment

In the preceding pages we have dwelt at length on the various aspects of suicides as enumerated in our classical works. We have also referred to the contradictory views expressed by the ancient law-givers or the Dharmaśāstrakāras, and also the punishments in case of suicides, prescribed by them. The consensus of opinion amongst these law-givers goes definitely against ordinary forms of suicides, but religious suicides in most cases are permitted, though not without protests.

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[1] *Ibid.*, June 11, 1954. Also cf. *Yamasmṛti*, verse 22.

A close study of these views, however, clearly shows that in ancient and mediaeval times generally, penances were prescribed, and not the punishment as we understand it today. It was, as a matter of fact, not a great concern of the authorities concerned, and suicides were on the whole lightly taken, though strongly condemned. The advent of the new age, however, changed the general idea about suicide and it came to be viewed seriously against the socio-economic background of the society. A suicide in fact is now treated as a slur, a reflection, an infamy on any government that claims to be civilized and well-ordered. As a result of this new awakening on the part of the Governments as well as the people, legislations were gradually evolved to meet the needs of the time. Suicide became a crime, and one who indulged in this act was a destitute, a criminal in the eyes of the law. Moreover, one who abetted and inspired such a crime was also held guilty of such acts. We have now, therefore, such legislations all over the world.

As to the punishment for attempting to commit suicide the Indian Penal Code declares :

"Whoever attempts to commit suicide and *does any act towards the commission of such offence*, shall be punished with simple imprisonment for a term which may extend to one year or with fine or with both."

According to the legal authorities, the crime is when it is in the course of the attempt; otherwise no offence is committed. The law-reports are full of such instances wherein the learned judges have, in specific cases, interpreted the one or the other legal points concerning this particular Act.

According to Section 305 of the Indian Penal Code, "if any person under eighteen years of age, any insane

person, any delirious person, any idiot, or any person in a state of intoxication commits suicide, whoever *abets the commission of such suicide* shall be punished with death or transportation for life or imprisonment for a term not exceeding ten years, and shall also be liable to fine."

Section 306 reads : "If any person commits suicide, whoever *abets the commission of such suicide*, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine."

Now, so far as Section 305 is concerned, the ordinary law of abetment is inapplicable. This and Section 306 apply only when suicide in fact is committed. "Persons actually assisting a Hindu widow in becoming *Satī* are guilty of suicide or abetment thereof."[1]

To illustrate this legal point, in a recent *Satī*-case (Emp. *vs.* Ram Dayal (1913) 36 All.) 26 persons were held guilty of abetment, who had done their best to dissuade the woman from becoming *Satī* and had even given information to the nearest police-station, but finding it impossible to dissuade her "complied with her wishes and helped her in effecting her object."[2]

We have thus several laws to deal with those attempting to commit suicide or abetting the commission of such suicide. But our Penal Code is silent on the punishment to be given to those who have actually committed suicide, as we have in most of the western countries. This is the only instance in our criminal law in which the attempt to commit the offence is

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[1] R. Ranchhod Das & D. K. Thakore, *The Indian Penal Code*, pp. 246-47; Syed S. Huda, *The Principles of the Law of Crimes in British India*, p. 342.

[2] *Ibid.*

punishable, but where actual commission is not punished. In Scotland, suicide involves *single escheat* or forfeiture of the movable estate of the deceased to the Crown, though the rule is never in ordinary cases put into force. In the United States the constitutions of several States provide that the property of suicides is not to be forfeited, while some do. England had also such a law that has now been repealed. But, as our common experience shows, sections dealing with these offences are never strictly enforced in our country, and in most cases they go unnoticed. As it is, resorting to hunger-strike and exhorting or insisting people to commit such acts, with whatever motive, is definitely tantamount to an "attempt to commit suicide" and "abetment of suicide" respectively.

## Conclusions

From the above studies of various aspects of suicide it is clear that suicide is now an interesting topic and constitutes a very significant part of our social science. It has, therefore, become a matter of utmost necessity that the suicides and their causes be recorded in detail. Almost all the sciences are nowadays governed by figures. As a matter of fact, we are living in an age of statistics which today touches the life of the people at every point—from the cradle to the grave.

In modern times every branch of human knowledge deals with statistics. In the fields of politics, economics, industry and commerce, astronomy, and even literature figures predominate without which it is impossible to complete study. But, unfortunately, we have no records or statistics for suicides in our country, whereas all the civilized nations of the world maintain as far as possible an accurate figure.

The Japanese Government has started a novel department for recording and lessening suicides in its country. The public board of this department is extremely interesting. It proclaims that those who want to lose life should come to the officer concerned and "take proper advice."

The Penal section of our Indian Penal Code requires judicious amendment. Instead of sending a man guilty of attempting to commit suicide to jail there should be immediate provision to meet the cause leading to this course. The cause of hunger, want, paucity of income should not be met by rigorous or simple imprisonment. "If freedom of life does not mean the freedom to commit suicide, Government should not enjoy freedom to allow starvation and sheer want to remain in the society for encouraging suicides."[1] Suicide, in the modern political set-up, especially in a democracy, is a serious slur on the government as well as on the society, and everything must be done to remove this blemish as far as possible.

We have a census of all living persons in India. Actually along with this census of the living, there is also a crying need for a census of the dead.

How many suicides do we have every year? What is the incidence of suicides in different income groups? If it is true, as psychologists aver, that suicides occur as a result of psychological complexes, why do suicides occur almost invariably among the poor and the destitute or the low middle-class income group? What is the relation between poverty and suicide, referred to in the preceding pages?

Again, among the suicides what is the ratio bet-

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[1] S. Huda, *op. cit.* (Section on *Suicide*).

ween men and women? Why do so many women commit suicide in India? What social or personal circumstances drive them to end their lives at their own hands?

English and Indian language dailies and periodicals often flash the pitiable cases of young married women who burn themselves to death. Every year hundreds of such cases are reported from different parts of the country—and perhaps many more go unreported at all!

And, what is the duty of our social workers? Do they try to discover and analyse the causes of these suicides, especially the cases where cruelty and maltreatment are responsible for driving the poor women to take the fatal plunge? What steps do the trained women social workers of the Women's Conference and the Social Welfare Board take to check these murders masquerading as suicides.

In China, too, they used to have such suicides. But soon after the revolution, they established women's "people's courts" to which any harassed and persecuted daughter-in-law could apply for protection. A mother-in-law who drove her daughter-in-law to suicide by her cruel treatment was tried for murder and sentenced for life. Another mother-in-law who had branded the daughter-in-law with a hot iron was sentenced for seven years. Husbands accused of cruelty and maltreatment were similarly punished. Within a few years the Chinese women were thus freed from the haunting spectre of death.

A casual look into the press-clippings (supplied by a regular agency) for just three weeks is enough to convince one of the horrible magnitude of this harvest of horrors that seem to suggest that such suicides and

murders involving women are a daily occurrence instead of being a rare phenomenon.

"New Delhi, Oct. 2—A 17-year-old girl committed suicide by drowning....."

"Meerut, Oct. 2—One Asa Jogi is alleged to have killed his wife by a 'gandasa' (chopper) after she refused to sever her relations with some other person in the village."

"Calcutta, Oct. 4—A married woman (35) soaked her clothes in kerosene oil and set fire to them. She died shortly after admission to the hospital."

"Madurai, Oct. 5—Perumal (26) and Lakshmi (20) both committed suicide as they were in love and could not be married."

"Bijnor, Oct. 7—The police have arrested a man of Kiratpur village for alleged murder of his wife. His father and mother have also been held for abetment of the crime. It is stated that the man's mother often quarreled with her daughter-in-law over the amount of dowry....."

"Gaya, Oct. 13—A young woman aged about 20 years ended her life by sprinkling kerosene oil over her body and setting fire to herself. She took this step after a quarrel with her husband who had married a younger girl."

"Kanpur, Oct. 15—Hearing was resumed in the Kusum Kumari dowry murder case in which the husband is alleged to have killed his wife after a quarrel over a dowry of Rs. 6,000....."

"Suraul (Bihar), Oct. 17—A gruesome murder of a young married woman has been reported. Her three uncles-in-law have been arrested. It is suspected that the cause of the murder was love intrigue."

"Calcutta—The husband and mother-in-law of the

late Mrs. Lalita Mulika are being prosecuted for aiding and abetting the deceased to commit suicide by burning herself. A social worker deposed that the girl was being tortured by her mother-in-law....."

"Kapurthala, Oct. 19—A young married woman, Shaila Wanti, committed suicide by setting fire to her clothes."

"Kanpur, Oct. 21—A young wife killed herself by setting fire to her oil-soaked clothes...."

"Varanasi, Oct. 25—The body of a 25-year-old woman with her 2-year-old daughter was discovered in a well. A couple of days earlier the woman had left her house after a quarrel in the family."

"Gaya, Oct. 25—The sudden rise in the incidence of suicides in Gaya district should make the authorities sit up.....At least ten persons commit suicide in the district every month. Domestic unhappiness is said to be the main reason in the majority of cases, and more women than men end their lives. Just last week two women burnt themselves to death. The evil of dowry system has been the cause of most such tragedies, and most of the victims are young girls."

The above news-items speak for themselves. How many more deaths will suffice to make our women social workers of the Women's Conference and the Central Social Welfare Board sit up and take notice?[1]

It may, therefore, be suggested that like in China, in India, too, social welfare agencies should probe into all such cases.

The Government should appoint women welfare officers whom harassed women can approach for protection in confidence.

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[1] *Blitz*, Bombay, Dec. 3, 1960.

Organizations like the Women's Conference should mobilise public opinion, specially among certain socially backward communities, to reform the attitude of the mothers-in-law and husbands and specially constituted women's courts should try all cases in which women are the victims of such cruelty.[1]

Our First and Second Five Year Plans are over. We are now passing through the Third Plan period. Needless to add they envisage all-round development and growth of India. But the most important issue of preventing suicide has been completely left out and ignored. Loss of less lives, and prevention of premature self-destruction, due to economic and other causes, must be our first and foremost aim to preserve man-power and genius of the country to expedite the growth of industry. The Government must keep alive to the magnitude of this problem and systematically prepare the statistics for suicides on State and Central level, and their causes be analytically preserved. In this respect we can take a lesson from the "Suicide-section" of the Post-war Japanese Government.

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[1] *Ibid.*, Nov. 5, 1960.

CHAPTER IV

# *SATĪ* AND *JAUHAR*

THE institution of *Satī* or self-immolation of widows is a very important form of suicide committed in the name of religious observances. This custom was not peculiar to Brāhmaṇism alone, but it "owes its origin to the oldest religious views and superstitious practice of mankind in general."[1] This practice was widely prevalent among the ancient Greeks, Germans, Slaves, Egyptians and other races of the world.[2] But a close scrutiny of the available data demonstrates that this was generally confined to the great ones, the princes and the nobles. "From Greece we have the instances of Evadne throwing herself in the funeral pyre of her husband and of the suicide of three Messenian widows mentioned by Pausanias. Sacrifice of widows occurred, as it seems a regular custom, among the Scandinavians, Heruli and Slavians."[3] Mr. Ralston observes that "the fact that, in Slavonic lands, a thousand years ago widows used to destroy themselves in order to accompany their dead husbands to the world of spirits, seems to rest on incontestable evidence" and "if the dead was a man of means and distinction he was also solaced by the sacrifice of his slaves."[4] Further, "funeral offerings of slaves occurred among the Teutons and the Gauls

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[1] P.V. Kane, *op. cit.*, p. 625.

[2] vide., Die Frau, pp. 56, 82-83; Schrader, *Pre-historic Antiquities of the Aryan People*, p. 391; Westermarck, *op. cit.*, vol. i, pp. 472-76, etc.

[3] Westermarck, *op. cit.*, pp. 247 ff; also see *ERE*, xii, pp. 27

[4] ff. Quoted in *ERE*, xii, pp. 27 ff.

of Caesar's time, and in the *Iliad* we read of twelve captives being laid on the funeral pyre of Petroclus."[1]

The system was deep-rooted in China, and in spite of imperial prohibitions, sutteeism of widowed wives and brides continued to flourish in China down to the present century and met with the same public applause as ever; whilst those widowed wives and brides who have lost their lives in preserving their chastity, are entitled both to an honorary gate and to a place in a temple of the State as an object of worship.[2]

In ancient Egypt there was a practice of forced self-immolation. W. M. Flinders Petrie observes that "in the first dynasty it was the custom to kill off the court and high officials, over five hundred first at the king's death; the custom dwindled to about a tenth by the end of the dynasty."[3] There are various references to human sacrifices in the *Book of the Dead*. Plutarch, quoting from Manetho, states that at El Kab they used to burn men alive, giving the name of *set* (name of God of Evil in Egypt). Women's adultery was punished by forcing them to burn themselves before the harem. In Japan and China, the original immolations were replaced by the custom of allowing the nearest relatives and slaves of the deceased simply to settle on the tomb, instead of entering in there to sacrifice to the manes, and by prohibiting widows from remarrying.

As regards widow-burning in India, during the Vedic age, there is a divergence of opinion among scholars. On the basis of the second *anuvāka* of the tenth *maṇḍala* of the *Ṛgveda* or the twenty-sixth to the twenty-eighth *varga* of the sixth *adhyāya* or section

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[1] cf., Homer's *Iliad*.
[2] Westermarck, *op. cit.*, ii, p. 242.
[3] Petrie, *Religious Life in Ancient Greece*, p. 391.

of the seventh *aṣṭaka*, and the other two verses found in the *Aukhya Śākhā* of the *Taittirīya Saṁhitā* quoted in the eighty-fourth *anuvāka* of the *Nārāyaṇa Upaniṣad*, some scholars like Raja Radhakanta Deva and Wilson, believe that this custom was prevalent during the period under review.[1] But these passages are of doubtful authenticity and cannot be cited as incontrovertibly referring to widow-burning then current.

According to Keith, the devotion to life and its pleasures marks the *Ṛgveda* and this is reflected in the disapproval therein implied of the practice of *satī*, and as such no trace of this form of religious suicide is to be found in that text.[2] The controversial hymn in question occurs in the eighth book of the *Ṛgveda*[3] and is attributed to Saṁkusuka, son of Yama. It gives a fair idea of the so-called rite over which controversies have raged. It is a funeral hymn and we quote below a few verses to give us an exact picture of the inner working of the minds of the *Ṛgvedic* people :

"Depart, Death, by a different path, by that which is thine own, different from the path of the gods. I speak to thee who hast eyes, who hast ears. Injure not our female progeny, harm not our heroes.

"May ye, who, giving up the path of Death, have come to this (side), be fully possessed of prolonged existence. May ye, the performers of sacrifice, thrive with progeny, and be pure and sanctified.....

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[1] Wilson, *Works*, vol. ii, pp. 293-305. The two so-called passages read as follows :

"अग्ने व्रतानां व्रतपतिरसि पत्यानुगमव्रतं चरिष्यामि तच्छकेयं तन्मेराध्यताम् इह त्वा अग्ने नमसा विधेम सुवर्गस्य लोकस्य समेत्यै। जुषाणो अद्यहविषा जातवेदो निशानि त्वा सत्त्वतो नय मा पत्युरग्रे।" (pp. 295-96.)

[2] *ERE*, xii. 33.

[3] x. ii, 18.

"Ascend to life anticipating old age, and trying to follow due order according to your number. Many Tvashtrī, the well-born, being propitious, grant you prolonged life here.

"Let these women, who are not widowed, who have good husbands, applying the collyrious butter to their eyes, enter; without tears, without disease, and full of ornaments, let these wives first enter the house.

"Rise up, woman, thou art lying by one whose life is gone; come, come to the world of living away from thy husband, and become the wife of him who grasps thy hand, and is willing to marry thee....."[1]

There is no doubt that we have in this hymn the whole of the funeral ceremony, and that it is a funeral hymn is evident from its having been all along used by the Hindus in the performance of their funeral rites. The separation of the dead from the living is symbolised by raising a stone-barrier which death may not transgress. The party then retires to the protection of the stone-fence, and further blessings follow. The men retire first, the married women after them, and for them a special prayer is given ("Let these women..

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[1] cf. the following verses:

"परं मृत्यो अनुपरेहि पन्थां यस्ते स्व इतरो देवयानात्
चक्षुष्मते पूश्टण्वते ते ब्रवीमि मा नः प्रजां रिरिषो मोत वीरान् ॥१॥
मत्योः पदं योपयन्तो यदैत द्राघीय आयः प्रतरं दधानाः।
आप्यायमानाः प्रजया धनेन शुद्धाः पूता भवत यज्ञियासः॥२॥
आ रोहतापुर्जरसं वृणाना अनुपूर्व्वं यतमाना इति ष्ठ।
इह त्वष्टा सुजनिमा सयोषा दीर्घमायुः करति जीवसे वः॥६॥
इमा नारीरविधवाः सुपत्नी राञ्जनेन सर्पिषा संविशन्तु।
अनश्रवोऽनमीवाः सुरत्ना आरोहन्तु जनयो योनिमग्ने॥७॥
उदीर्ष्व नार्य्यभि जीवलोकं गतासुमेतमुपशेष एहि।
हस्तग्राभस्य दिधिषोस्तवेदं पत्युर्जनित्वमभिसंवभूथ॥८॥ (ibid.)

.....enter the house"). The widow of the dead is not included among them; she remains lying by the corpse. A relative or servant now advances and removes her, addressing to her the verse: "Rise up, woman.....marry thee."

The simplicity of the ideas, the natural flow of the language and the vividness and dramatic detail with which the whole ceremony is described leave no doubt in the mind as to what is intended. There is no mention of fire, none of wood and burning, to suggest any thing like incremation. The body is deposited in the earth and the earth is invoked to lie lightly on it. In other words, this is the positive proof that the earliest rite was burial, and not incremation.[1] This inference, however, though supported by some casual verses in other parts of the Veda, is opposed to certain positive statements, in a preceding hymn of the same Veda, where fire is invoked not to hurt the body consigned to it, and incremation is clearly and unmistakably indicated. This has given rise to controversies and has been differently interpreted by different scholars in different contexts. But the oldest work in which the fusion of the two rites is found is the Āraṇyaka portion of the Brāhmaṇa of the *Black Yajurveda*. It describes the ceremonies under the title of *Pitṛmedha* (or rites for the welfare of the manes). After the preliminary operations, the next is to dig a trench, arrange fuel thereon, wash, shave and pare the nails of the corpse, and place it on the pyre along with the widow of the deceased. These were probably performed without the aid of any mantra, for the Āraṇyaka does not allude to them. When placed on the pyre, it should have in its hands, if of a

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[1] R.L. Mitra, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, p. 126.

Brāhmaṇa, a bit of gold, if of a Kṣatriya a bow, if of a Vaiśya a jewel. The wife should lie down on the left side of the corpse according to Baudhāyana and Sāyaṇa. Āśvalāyana recommends that she should be placed near the head on the north side. The chief mourner, or he who is to set fire to the pyre, should then address the dead saying: "O mortal, this woman (your wife), wishing to be joined to you in a future world (i.e., to obtain the *patiloka* or the region of husbands) is lying by thy corpse; she has always observed the duties of a faithful wife; grant her your permission to abide in this world, and relinquish your wealth to your descendants."[1] A younger brother of the dead, or a disciple, or a servant should then proceed to the pyre, hold the left hand of the woman and ask her to come away, saying: "Rise up, woman, thou liest by the side of the lifeless; come to the world of the living, away from thy husband, and become the wife of him who holds thy hand and is willing to marry thee."[2] In a subsequent mantra, she is to be asked to bring away the bit of gold from the hand of the corpse, with the following words: "For the promotion of thy wealth, and glory as a Brāhmaṇa woman, and beauty and power, take the gold from the hand of the dead (and abide) in this (region); we (shall dwell) here well-served and prospering, and overcoming all presumptuous assailants."[3] The scho-

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[1] cf. the following:

"माता रुद्राणां दुहिता वसूनां स्वसाऽऽदित्यानाममृतस्य नाभिः। प्रणुवीचं चिकितुषे जनाय मा गमनागामदितिं वधिष्ठ। पिवतूदकं तृणान्यत्तु। ओमुत्सृजत॥

[2] cf. the following: "उदीर्ष्व नार्यभि . . . . . वभूव" (quoted above).

[3] cf. the following verse:

"सुवर्ण हस्तादाददाना मृतस्य श्रियै ब्रह्मणे तेजसे बलाय। अत्रैव त्वमिह वयं सुशेवा विश्वाः स्पृधो अभिमातीर्जयेन् . . . ."

liast of Āśvalāyana says : the remover of the widow, and not the widow herself, should take the gold, and that in the event of his being a slave, this and the two preceding mantras should be repeated by the chief mourner. Wilson and Max Müller take it in the same sense, but Sāyaṇa's comment is opposed to this interpretation.[1] The words to be addressed to a Kṣatriya or a Vaiśya woman are the same, the words *bow* and *jewel* being respectively substituted for *gold* and *Kṣatriya* and *Vaiśya* respectively for *Brāhmaṇa*.

Whatever the interpretation, under any circumstance, the removal of the widow and of the articles is contemplated. The *Āraṇyaka* gives no alternative and the Sūtrakāras are silent on the subject, which clearly shows that when the *Āraṇyaka* was compiled, the inhuman practice of burning the living wife with her dead husband, had not obtained currency in the country, and as we know from the writings of the Greek authors that "the *satī* rite had formed an important part of the Hindu funeral ceremony three centuries before Christ, and at least four centuries before the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, it may be presumed that our text dates from at least eight centuries before the Christian era."[2] The allusions in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* may possibly be interpolations, and if so the *Āraṇyaka* may be a century or two later, but that it was compiled long before the advent of Alexander in India, and that

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[1] Sāyaṇa's interpretation reads :

"हे नारी त्वं "श्रियै" सम्पदर्थं, "ब्रह्मणे" ब्राह्मेण जात्यर्थं, "तेजसे" कान्त्यर्थं, "बलाय" शरीरबलार्थं, "मृतस्य" पुरुषस्य, "हस्तात्" "सुवर्णं" "आददाना" सती, "अत्रैव" लोकेतिष्ठ। 'वयं' अपि 'इह' 'लोके, 'सुशेवा' सुखं सेवमानाः सन्तः, "स्पृधः" अस्माभिः सह स्पर्द्धमानाः, "विश्वाः" 'अभिमातीः' सर्व्वान् शत्रून् 'जयेम'। Quoted, Mitra, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, p. 137, fn.

[2] *Ibid.*

Baudhāyana flourished before Bharadvāja and Kātyāyana cannot be questioned.[1] In other words, these evidences, when read together, leave us little doubt that the rite of *satī* was prevalent among the Vedic people, particularly the Brāhmaṇas, the Kṣatriyas and the Vaiśyas, though it was practised on rare occasions.[2] Thus, the practice seems to have risen during the Vedic period, though confined to small sections, and was certainly indigenous, not borrowed from outside, as some scholars would have us believe.

In other words, the custom of sacrificing the wife at the husband's death existed among the Aryans in the Indo-European period, and later fell into disuse among the Vedic Aryans. We have no mention of it in the *Avestā*. This is further proved by the evidence contained in the *Atharvaveda* which shows that the general rite of the Vedic age preserved some formalities reminiscent of the archaic custom of *satī*. As we have shown above, it was customary for the widow to lie by the side of her husband's corpse on the funeral pyre, but instead of immolating herself she was asked to come down, and a prayer was offered that she would lead a prosperous life enjoying the bliss of children and wealth. This clearly shows that the custom being a barbarous one came to be discouraged rather than encouraged by the cultured Aryans in the course of time. This is evident from the fact that we have no explicit reference to this custom either in the Brāhmaṇa

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[1] For details, *Ibid.*, pp. 137-54.

[2] For a detailed study of the different interpretations of the verse "इमा नारीरविधवाः. . . . जनयो योनिमग्ने. . . . " (quoted above), see Mitra, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, pp. 147-55; For other details see, Potdar, *Rgvedic Sacrifices*; A. S. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilisation*, pp. 137 ff.

literature (c. 1500 B.C.—c. 700 B.C.) or in the *Gṛhya-sūtras* (c. 600—c. 300 B.C.), i.e., prior to the fourth century B.C., in spite of the detailed discussion of various rituals and *saṁskāras* in them.[1] From the details of the general ritual and procedure we learn that the widow was to be brought back from the funeral pyre, either by her husband's brother or disciple, or by an old trusted servant. The *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* (VI.I) says that while returning from the funeral pyre, the widow took away from her husband's hands objects like bow, gold, jewels etc. which were burnt along with the widow in an earlier age. And, then a hope was expressed that the widow and her relatives would lead a happy and prosperous life.[2]

The Buddhist literature also does not contain any specific reference to *satī*. Had it been widely prevalent during this period, the Buddha must have vehemently opposed this inhuman practice. This further shows that the custom was not popular even in the Kṣatriya circles in c. 500 B.C. Moreover, we have no particular reference to this practice either in Megasthenes or in Kauṭilya, in the *Dharmasūtras* or in the early *Smṛtis* like Manu's and Yājnavalkya's, though we have in them an elaborate discussion of the duties of women and widows as well as suicides in general.[3]

Except the *Viṣṇu* and *Vyāsa Saṁhitās*, none of the Dharmaśāstras contains any reference to *satī*. The *Vyāsa Saṁhitā* says : " a good wife should renounce all pleasures as long as her husband would be about in a distant country. The widow of a Brāhmaṇa should either immolate herself in fire with the corpse of her

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[1] For details, See Altekar, *op. cit.*, pp. 137 ff.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 139.
[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 140 ff.

deceased husband or observe a life-long vow of *brahmacaryam* from that date."[1] The *Viṣṇu-dharmasūtra* declares : "on her husband's death the widow should observe celibacy or should ascend the funeral pyre after him."[2] From the accounts of Strabo, we learn that the Macedonian Greeks under Alexander found that *satī* was practised among the Cathaei tribe in the Punjab in the 4th century B.C.[3] The practice is said to have arisen from the apprehension that their wives would desert or poison their husbands. The Greek writers (3rd cent. B.C.) also refer to the widow of an Indian commander who departed to the pyre crowned with fillets by her women and decked splendidly as for a wedding. The *Manusmṛti* is almost silent on this point.

In the *Mahābhārata* we have the story of the self-immolation of a princess born in the Madra country, i.e., Mādrī, the favourite wife of Pāṇḍu, who burnt herself with her husband's body[4] because, it is said, she was not sure that she could lead an ideal life. In the Virāṭa-parva, Sairandhrī is ordered to be burnt with Kīcaka.[5] From the Mausala-parva we learn that four wives of Vāsudeva—Devakī, Bhadrā, Rohiṇī and Madirā —burnt themselves with him. Rukmiṇī, Śaibyā, Haimavatī, Jambvatī among the consorts of Kṛṣṇa burnt themselves along with his dead body while other queens such as Satyabhāmā went to the forest for toil and

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[1] *Vyāsa Saṁhitā* (section on crimes).

[2] 25.14 : "मृते भर्तरि ब्रह्मचर्यं तदन्वारोहणं वा" (quoted by the *Mitākṣarā* on *Yājñavalkyasmṛti*, 1.86).

[3] Strabo, xv, 1.30 & 62, Hamilton and Falconer's trans., vol. iv.

[4] *Mbh.*, Ādiparva, 95, 65 : "तत्रैनं चिताग्निस्थं माद्री समन्वारुरोह" (Also see Ādi., 125-29.)

[5] *Ibid.*, Virāta., 23, 8 : "सैरन्ध्रया: सूतपुत्रेण सह दाहं विशां पति:"

meditation (*tapas*).[1] This is also corroborated by the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*[2] wherein it is stated that eight queens of Kṛṣṇa—Rukmiṇī and others—entered fire on his death. The *Vāyu Purāṇa* has only one instance of *satī*. The text is not explicit whether she did actually ascend the pyre. The *Brahma Purāṇa* and the *Harivaṁśa* fill up the blank. They say that king Bāhu's wife ascended the funeral pyre evidently to immolate herself and the sage Aurva dissuaded her from the act. The *Viṣṇu* and the *Bṛhan-nāradīya* say so explicitly.[3] The ground on which Aurva appears to have dissuaded the wife of Bāhu from her act of self-immolation suggests that the custom was not still regarded with approval. The instance then falls in time and spirit with the period anterior to that of the *Ṛgveda* which reminds us of an ancient custom of the *satī* but shows its discontinuance.[4] This leads us to conclude that the Purāṇa had preserved for us a fact which might be considered historical as it synchronises with the political history of King Sagara.[5] The Śānti-parva furnishes us with an interesting story. It describes how a *kapotī* (female-pigeon) entered fire on the death of her husband, the male-pigeon.[6] The

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[1] *Ibid.*, 7.18 (chap. 7, 73-74).

[2] *Viṣṇu.*, v. 38.2 :

"अष्टौ महिष्यः कथिता रुक्मिणी प्रमुखास्तु याः
उपगुह्य हरेर्देहं विविशुस्ता हुताशनम्"

[3] *JRAS*, 1919, p. 355, fn. 4.

[4] *Vedic Index*, vol. i, p. 488.

[5] D.K.R. Patil, *Cultural History from the Vāyu Purāṇa*, pp. 155-56.

[6] *Mbh.*, Śānti, 148. 10-12 :

प्रतिव्रता सम्प्रदीप्तम् प्रविवेश हुताशनम्
ततश्चित्राङ्गदधरं भर्तारं सान्वपश्यत
. . .ततः स्वर्गं गतः पक्षी भार्यया सह संगतः

Strī-parva[1] is of great interest to us in that it contains somewhat conflicting statements. We have the description of the death-ceremonies performed for the fallen Kauravas. But it is rather curious to find that no mention is made of any widows immolating themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands. The *Veṇīsaṁhāra* refers to the case of a *satī* on the Kaurava field (Act IV), but it is due to the anachronism of its author. The epic itself states that all the widows of the fallen heroes remained behind and offered them funeral oblations. Thus, among the thousands of the widows of heroes slain in the Bhārata War, none followed her husband as *satī*, though some of them are said to have killed themselves by drowning. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*[2], however, makes explicit mention of Gāndhārī's burning herself on the death of her husband, Dhṛtarāṣṭra. The *Padma Purāṇa* (Uttara-kāṇḍa, ch. 279) says that all the Yādava widows became *satīs*. All this shows that the custom was originally confined only to royal families and great warriors. During the 4th cent. B.C. and earlier a few cases of *satī* are recorded and the widows of the kings Khanitra and Variṣyanta are stated to have ascended the funeral pyre. According to some, it is likely, however, that the Purāṇas which describe these incidents may be projecting later customs of earlier history.[3] And, this appears to be more plausible. Moreover, it was not binding even on those widows of the warriors to enter the funeral pyre of their husbands. It was perhaps a voluntary affair. In this connection several texts are cited by Aparārka, which

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[1] *Mbh.*, chap. 26.

[2] *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, 1. 13.57. Also see Raghunandana's *Śuddhitattva*, 242.

[3] *Bihar through the Ages*, p. 172.

apparently forbid self-immolation to Brāhmaṇa widows.[1] "The authors of digests," according to P.V. Kane, "explain away these passages by saying that they only prohibit self-immolation by a Brāhmaṇa widow on a funeral pyre different from that of the husband, i.e., a Brāhmaṇa widow can burn herself only on the funeral pyre of her husband and if his body is cremated elsewhere in a foreign land, his widow cannot, on hearing of his death, burn herself later. They rely on the text of Uśanas that a Brāhmaṇa widow should not follow her husband on a separate funeral pyre."[2] The *Veda-vyāsa-smṛti*,[3] however, advises a Brāhmaṇa widow to enter fire, clasping the dead body of her husband. In case she does not, she should give up all luxuries and emaciate her body by austerities.

As regards the self-immolation of the Brāhmaṇa widows we have again conflicting statements in the two great epics. While the *Rāmāyaṇa*[4] refers to the self-immolation of a Brāhmaṇa woman, the wife of a *brahmarṣi* and mother of Vedavatī, who burnt herself

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[1] "पैठीनसिः। मृतानुगमनं नास्ति ब्राह्मण्या ब्रह्मशासनात्। इतरेषां तु वर्णानां स्त्रीधर्मोयं परः स्मृतः॥ अङ्गिराः। या स्त्री ब्राह्मणजातीया मृतं पतिमनुव्रजेत्। सा स्वर्गमात्मघातेन नात्मानां न पतिं नयेत्॥ व्याघ्रपात्। न म्रियते। समं भर्ता ब्राह्मणी शोकमोहिता। प्रव्रज्यागतिमाप्नोति मरणादात्मघातिनी" (quoted by Aparārka, p. 112. These are again quoted by the *Mitākṣarā* on *Yājñavalkya-smṛti*, 1.86). For other details, also see S. C. Sircar, *Some Aspects of the Earliest Social History of India.*

[2] *History of Dharmaśāstra*, Vol. II, pt. i, p. 627.

[3] II.53 :

मृतं भर्तारमादाय ब्राह्मणीवह्निमाविशेत्
जीवन्ती चेत्त्यक्तकेशा तपसा शोषयेद्वपुः

[4] *Uttarakāṇḍa*, 17.15; Aparārka, p. 112, refers to the *Rāmāyaṇa*: "अत एव रामायणादौ ब्राह्मण्यादीनां स्वभर्तृशरीरालिंगनपूर्वकं स्वशरीरदहनमुपाख्यायते . . . ."; also see *Rāmāyaṇa*, vi. 32.32.

in fire when molested by Rāvaṇa, the Strī-parva[1] (of the *Mahābhārata*) describes how Kṛpi, the wife of Droṇācārya, the Brāhmaṇa Commander-in-Chief of the Kauravas, appeared with dishevelled hair on the battle-field on the death of her husband, but it makes no mention of her burning along with the latter. This again shows that this practice was prevalent among Kṣatriyas, the burning of Brāhmaṇa widows on a large scale began much later. The fact may be explained in the following way : to begin with, this practice was prevalent among the Brāhmaṇas, the Kṣatriyas and the Vaiśyas. But as it had a tinge of heroism and valour, gradually the rite came to be more popular with the Kṣatriya warriors and subsequently expressed itself in a more horrible form, that of *Jauhar* in the mediaeval age and even earlier. With the disappearance of the Rajput States, however, this practice came to be slowly confined to the Brāhmaṇas and was in vogue till the advent of the present century.

From the above study, it is clear that by 400 A.D. when the *Purāṇas* were given their present form, the custom was gradually coming into general vogue. We have, however, the earliest historical instance of *satī* in the wife of the Hindu general Keteus who died in 316 B.C. while fighting against Antigonos. The Greek historians tell us that one of his two wives (the elder one had a child and was therefore forbidden) was led to the pyre by her brother, and that she was all gleeful

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[1] *Mbh.*, 23 (Strī-parva) :

तां पश्यरुदतीमार्द्रां मुक्तकेशीमधोमुखीम्
हतं पतिमुपासन्तीं द्रोणं शस्त्रभृतांवरम्
वार्णैर्भिन्नतनुत्राणां धृष्टद्युम्नेन केशव
उपास्ते वै मृधे द्रोणं जटिलाब्रह्मचारिणी

even when the flames enveloped her person. According to them, the custom was also prevalent among the Kathians or the Kaṭhas of the Punjab.

In the early centuries of the Christian era the practice was gradually gaining popularity. We have a reference to it in the *Viṣṇusmṛti* (c. 100 A.D.). Viṣṇu is of the view that in spite of diversity of *Karman*, a widow can, though other relations cannot, go the way of the departed soul by dying after him (17.43). The custom, however, seems to have become popular in Kṣatriya circles since c. 400 A.D. Vātsyāyana (iv. 2.53), Bhāsa (*Dūtaghaṭotkaca* and *Ūrubhaṅga*), Kālidāsa (*Kumārasambhava*, Canto IV) and Śūdraka (*Mṛcchakaṭika*, Act X), have all referred to the prevalence of this custom. And, so is the case with Bṛhaspati, Parāśara (iv. 26-8), the author of the *Agnipurāṇa* (221.23), *Aṅgiras-smṛti*, (Medhātithi on Manu, V. 157), Virāṭa (Aparārka on *Yāj.*, 1.87), Bāṇa (*Kādambarī*, Pūrvārdha, p. 308) and Devanabhaṭṭa, a twelfth century writer from South India (*Vyavahārakāṇḍa*, p. 598), who have expressed their views for and against this practice.

The unequivocal stand of Bāṇa is further supported by the Tantra writers who joined him in his crusade against this practice. According to the latter, woman is the embodiment of Supreme Goddess, and if a person burnt her with her husband, he would be condemned to eternal hell (*Mahānirvāṇatantra*, X. 79-80). But, in spite of this tirade, the practice continued to gain in popularity among the Kṣatriya classes and the theory of *Karman* came to be so modified as to support the *satī* custom. The Scythian influence (c. 150 B.C.-250 A.D.) further added fuel to the fire, and thus from 700 A.D. fiery advocates came forward with their new arguments and theories extolling this custom (cf., Aṅgi-

rasa, Hārīta, Parāśara etc.) with the result that the *satī* was now a common phenomenon throughout Northern India and Kashmir, the Deccan, the extreme south of India, Western India, Rajputana and among the Sikhs (in spite of its prohibition by the Gurus), the Marāṭhā ruling families and also the Muslims, as is clear from the accounts of the foreigners and the records of the East India Company. Moreover, soon after 1000 A.D. the Brāhmaṇas, in imitation of the Kṣatriyas, also followed suit and the custom came to be practised by a few Brāhmaṇa families, both in North and South India. In other words, *satī* in its latest form was a mediaeval growth though it had its germs in ancient customs and rituals.

### SAHAMARANA *v.* ANUMARANA :

The burning of a widow on the death of her husband was known as *sahamaraṇa* or *sahagamana* or *anvārohaṇa* (i.e., when she ascended the funeral pyre of her husband and was burnt along with his corpse). On the other hand, *anumaraṇa* was slightly different from *sahamaraṇa*. It occurred when the wife, learning of the death of her husband after his cremation, resolved upon death, prepared *citā* (funeral pyre) and burnt with her husband's ashes or his *pādukās* (sandals) or "even without any memento of his, if none be available."[1] We

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[1] *History of Dharmaśāstra*, Vol. II, pt. i, p. 617: " . . . देशान्तरमृते तस्मिन्साध्वी तत्पादुकाद्वयम् संशुद्धा प्रविशेज्जातवेदसं ऋग्वेद वादात्साध्वी स्त्री न भवेदात्मघातिनी . . . . " (vide., Aparārka, p. 111 and *Madanapārijāta*, p. 198). Aparārka says that the Vedic verses which render rslf-immolation free from the sin of suicide are verses like :

इमा नारीरविधवाः सुपत्नीराञ्जनेन सर्पिषा सं विशन्तु
अनश्रवोऽनमीवाः सुरत्ना आरोहन्तु जनयो योनिमग्ने

cf. *Ṛgveda*, x. 18.7-8; *Atharvaveda*, xii. 2,31 & xviii. 3.57 etc.) (For further elaboration, see Kane, *op. cit*, p. 617, fn. 1450 & 1451. We have discussed this piece of evidence in detail in the preceding pages.

have several instances of *anumaraṇa*. The story of Rati, the wife of Kāmadeva, who was burnt by Śiva, as narrated in Kālidāsa's *Kumārasambhava*[1] informs us that she thtew herself into fire, but was held back by a heavenly voice. Besides we have a reference in the *Kāmasūtra*[2] and also the story of Yaśomatī, the wife of Prabhākaravardhana and mother of Harṣa of Kanauja in the *Harṣacarita*,[3] and the story of Rājyaśrī, the sister of Harṣa, and the story of the queen of Ananta and several others. The mother of Harṣa also chose to predecease her husband by committing herself to flames when it was declared that there was no chance of her husband's recovery. A passage of the *Harṣacarita* gives a beautiful poetic description of *anumaraṇa*. Herein the glory of the moon-lotuses is "said to be laughing like a woman intent on *anumaraṇa* who is decked with ear-ornaments and wears garlands on her head."[4] Bāṇa's *Kādambarī*[5], on the other hand, vehemently condemns *anumaraṇa*. In the *Gāthāsaptaśatī* we have a reference to a woman being decked for *anumaraṇa*.[6] The *Rājataraṅgiṇī*[7] gives us several instances of *satī*, where besides the wives, the

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[1] *Kumārasambhava*, IV. 34.

[2] The *Kāmasutra* (VI. 3.53) speaks of *anumaraṇa*.

[3] *Ucchvāsa*, 5.

[4] *Ibid.*, (sixth para from the end): "दन्तामलपत्रप्रसाधितकर्णिकासु केसरमालाकल्पित मुण्डमालिकासु अनुर्मतुमिबोधतासु प्रहसितमुखीषु कुमुदलक्ष्मीषु. . . ."

[5] cf., P.V. Kane's edition of the *Pūrvabhāga* of the *Kādambarī* in para 177, in which Candrāpīḍa addresses Mahāśvetā and gives instances of famous women such as Rati, Pṛthā, Duḥśalā, Uttarā etc. that did not resort to *sahagamana*. The passage reads as follows: "यदेतदनुमरणं नाम तदतिनिष्फलम्. . . . .अन्याश्च रक्षः सुरासुरमुनिसिद्धगन्धर्वकन्यका. . . . .विधृतजीविताः"

[6] Nirn. Ed., VII. 33.

[7] VI. 107, 195; VII. 103, 478; VIII, V etc.; Altekar, *op. cit.*, pp. 149-50.

principle of dying after a beloved relative was extended to relations other than the wife as well, for instance, to concubines, mothers, sisters and sisters-in-law (as in the case of Nepal) and also ministers, servants and nurses as well as a cat, which reminds us of the *harakiri* of Japan. The *Kathāsaritsāgara* (written in Kashmir in 1100 A.D.) supports such instances which occurred due to the great influence of the Scythians.

We have yet another peculiar instance of *satī* in Nepal where a mother committed *satī* on the death of her son. Visūjitamalla, king of Nepal (Nepal saṁvat 878), was killed by some people. This infuriated the Queen-mother so much that she openly scolded and fied on her subjects for their utter silence on her son's tragic death and burnt herself on the pyre of her son.[1]

Further, we have a unique instance of two sisters committing suicide on the death of their brother, along with the latter's wife. The *Vṛṣotsargavidhi*[2] says that on the death of Mahendramalla (of Nepal) in saṁvat 694 his sisters Bhavānī and Śāntā along with the former's two wives practised *sahagamana* or *sahamaraṇa*. This is probably an instance without parallel in the annals of our country. This further shows that sometimes besides wives, even mothers and sisters committed *satī* on the death of their sons and brothers, out of affection,

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[1] This information was very kindly given to me by my revered friend, Dr. D. R. Regmi of Kathmandu (Nepal) who has made exclusive study of the numerous manuscripts unnoticed so far, in the Durbar Library, Kathmandu.

[2] The manuscript is in possession of Dr. D. R. Regmi, who has kindly supplied me with the relevant extract which reads as follows :

"संवत् ६९४ भाद्रपद शुक्लतृतीया वृहस्पतिवार श्वकुनु रामशरण विज्या क दिवस श्रीमहेन्द्रमल्ल-सहगामिनी वैमात्री भवानी वैमात्री शान्ता-दूइनी हेरा . ."

The MS. is in Sanskrit but its noting is in Newārī language.

devotion, grief and unbearable pangs of separation. This further explains the fact that commission of *satī* was in most cases a voluntary affair and not under compulsion or coercion and bore a divine touch which attracted the simple religious-minded womenfolk. Moreover, it makes it quite clear that the rite of *satī* was not confined to wives alone; on the other hand, it was often performed by sisters, mothers and other relations contrary to the Śāstric injunctions. In other words, the sanctity of the rite was gradually degraded and it was observed more in its breach than in its strict observance in later times, as it developed into a craze with the ladies of the upper classes in the course of time.

Was this religious practice unanimously sanctioned by our ancient law-givers? The reply would be in the negative. It is true that according to Śāṅkha and Aṅgirasa, Hārita and others innumerable merits flow from the performance of *satī*. "She, who follows her husband in death dwells in heaven for as many years as there are hairs on the human body, viz., $3\frac{1}{2}$ crores of years. In heaven she, being solely devoted to her husband and praised by bevies of heavenly damsels, sports with her husband for as long as the rule of fourteen Indras. That woman who ascends the funeral pyre when the husband dies is equal to Arundhatī in her character and is praised in heaven."[1] According to Hārita: "that woman who follows her husband in death purifies three families, viz., of her mother, of her father and of her husband."[2] But there were old commentators,

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[1] & [2] Quoted in *Mitākṣarā* on *Yājñavalkya-smṛti*, 1.86. Aparārka, p. 110; *Śuddhitattva*, p. 234. The *Mitākṣarā*, after quoting the above passages adds: "अयं च सर्वास्तां स्त्रीणामगर्भिणीनाम बालापत्यानामाचाण्डालं साधारणो धर्मः। भर्तारं यानुगच्छतीत्यविशेषोमादानात्" ("This duty of *anvārohaṇa* is common to the women of all castes from the

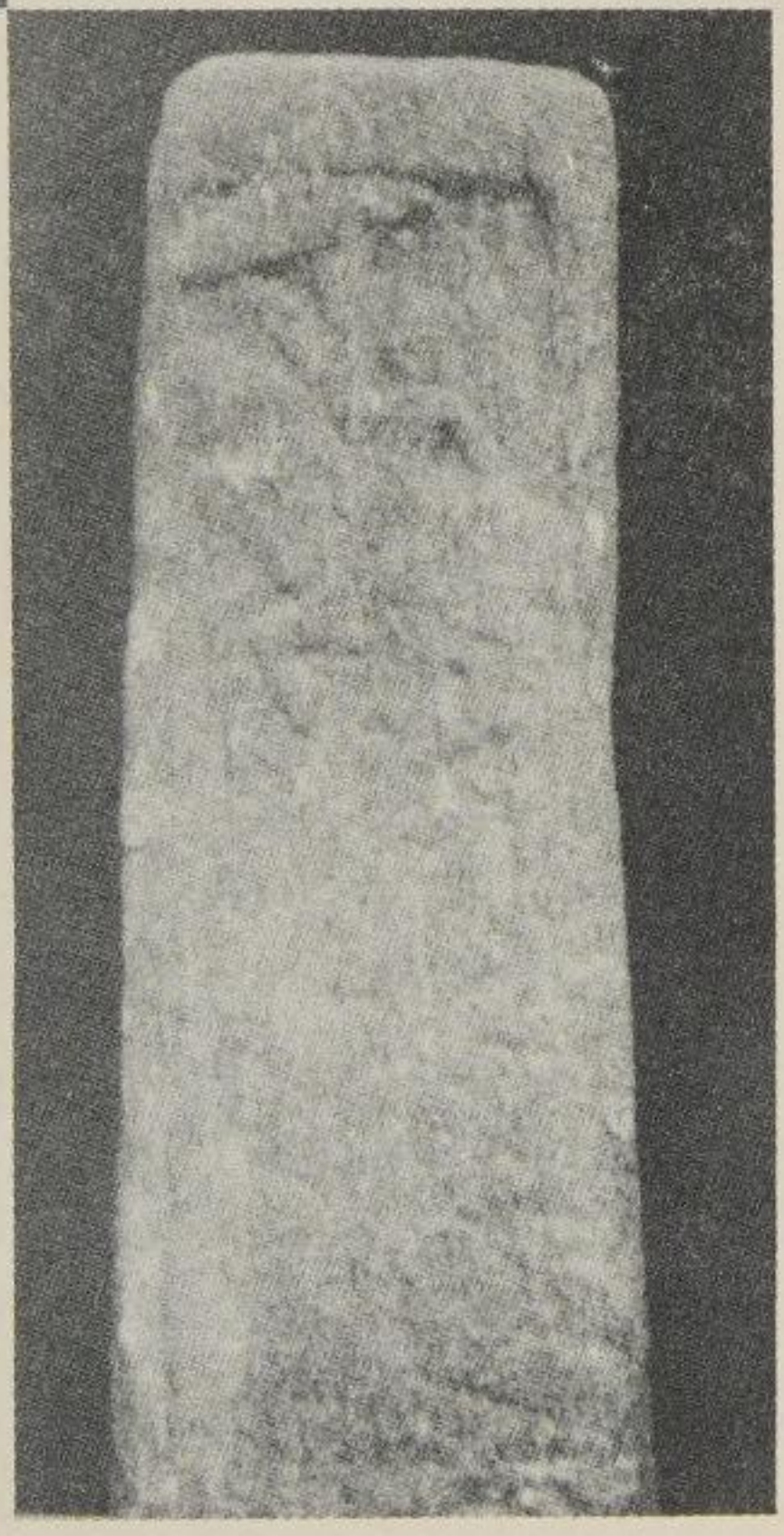

PLATE I, No.1 (*above*). VIRA-KAL from Village Buram, District Manbhum, Bihar (10th cent. A.D. );
No. 2 (*right*). SATI MEMORIAL STONE from Village Budhpur, District Manbhum, Bihar ( 10th cent. A.D. ).

PLATE II, Nos. 1 & 2. SATI MEMORIAL STONES, from Village Budhpur (*above*) and Buram(*right*) Dist Manbhum, Bihar ( 10th cent. A. D.).

PLATE III, Nos. 1 & 2. SATI MEMORIAL STONES from Budhpur, Dist. Manbhum, Bihar (9th-11th cent. A.D.).

PLATE IV, Nos. 1 & 2. SATI MEMORIAL STONES, from Budhpur. *Above*, 9th - 11th cent. A. D. ; *right*, 10th cent. A. D.

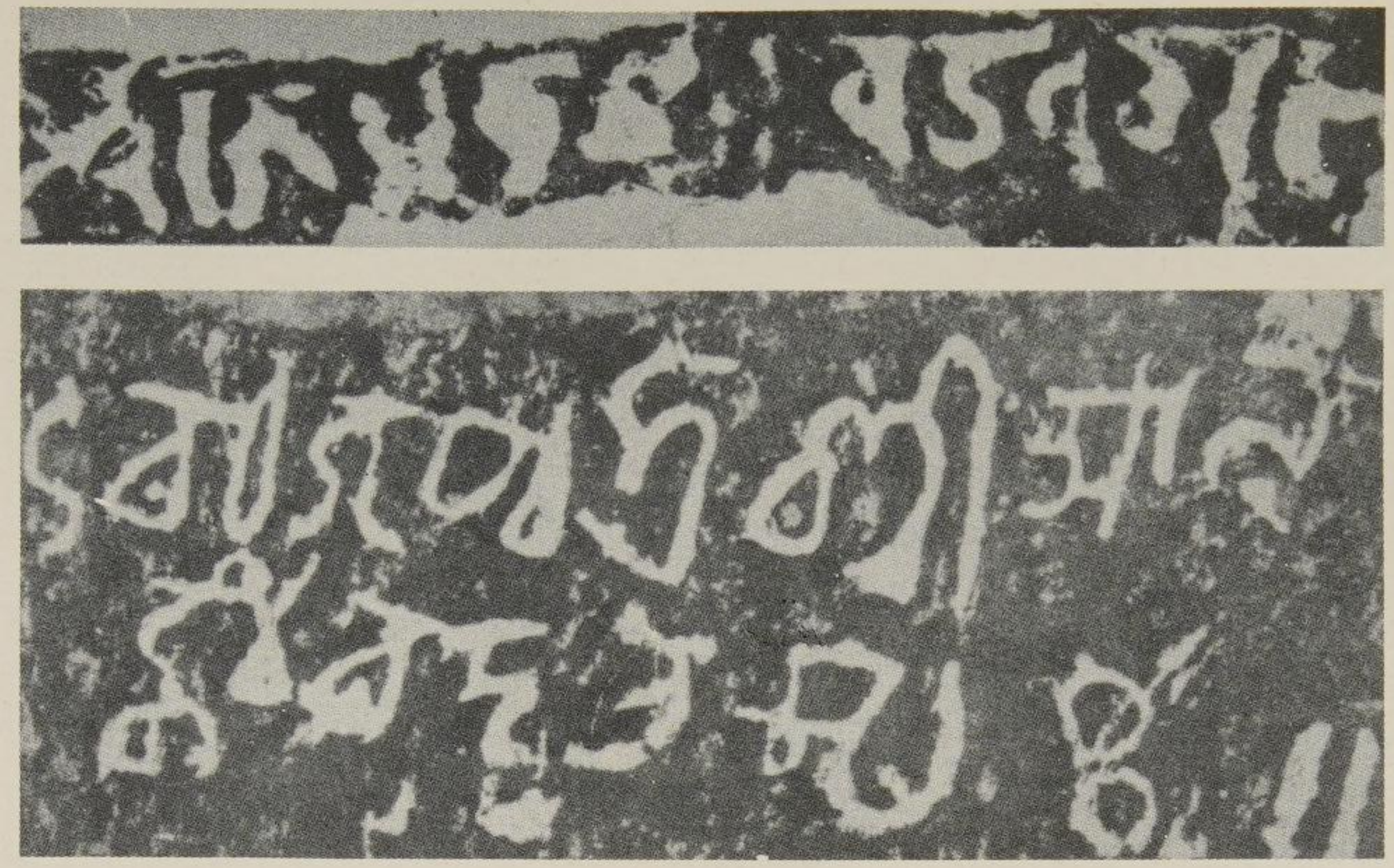

PLATE V. INSCRIPTIONS ON SATI MEMORIAL STONES. *Above*, of Plate IV, No. 1 and *below*, of Plate III, No. 1.

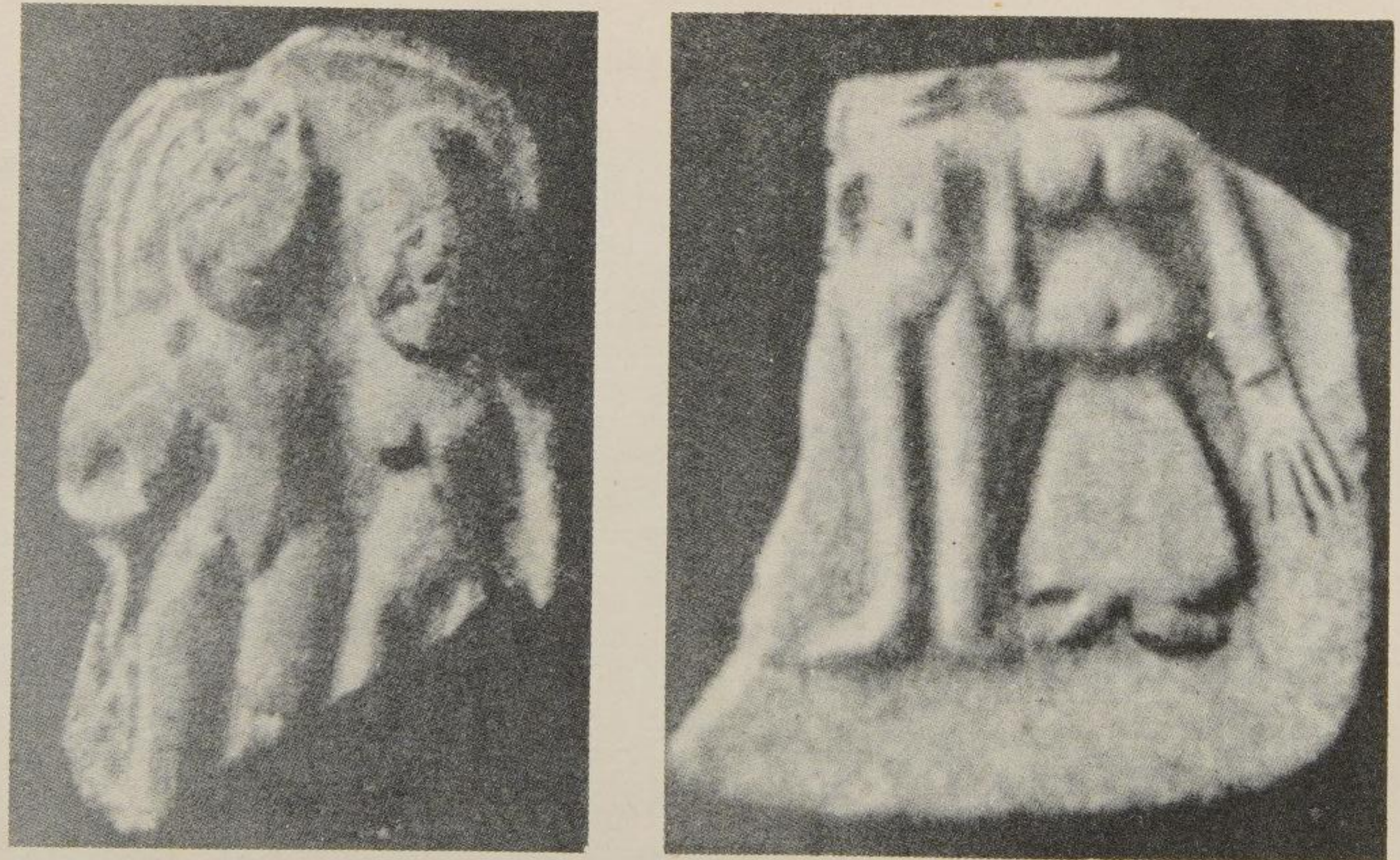

PLATE VI, No. 1 & 2. SATTI-SATTA PLAQUES from Ahicchatra Bareilly Dist. U. P.
*Left*, 8th cent, *right*, 9th to 11th cent. A.D.

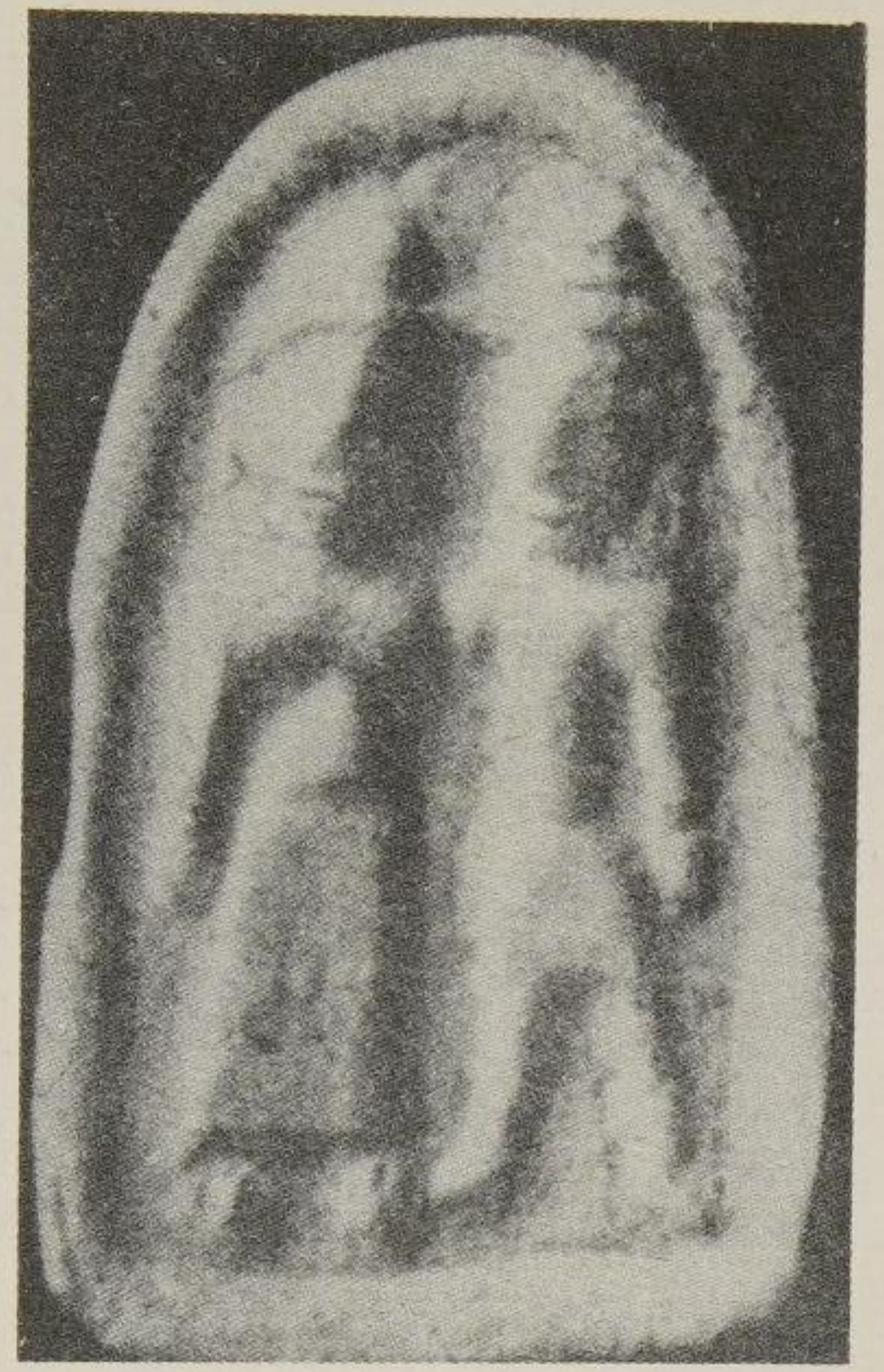

PLATE VII, Nos. 1 & 2. SATTI-SATTA PLAQUES from Ahicchatra ( A.D. 850-1100 ).

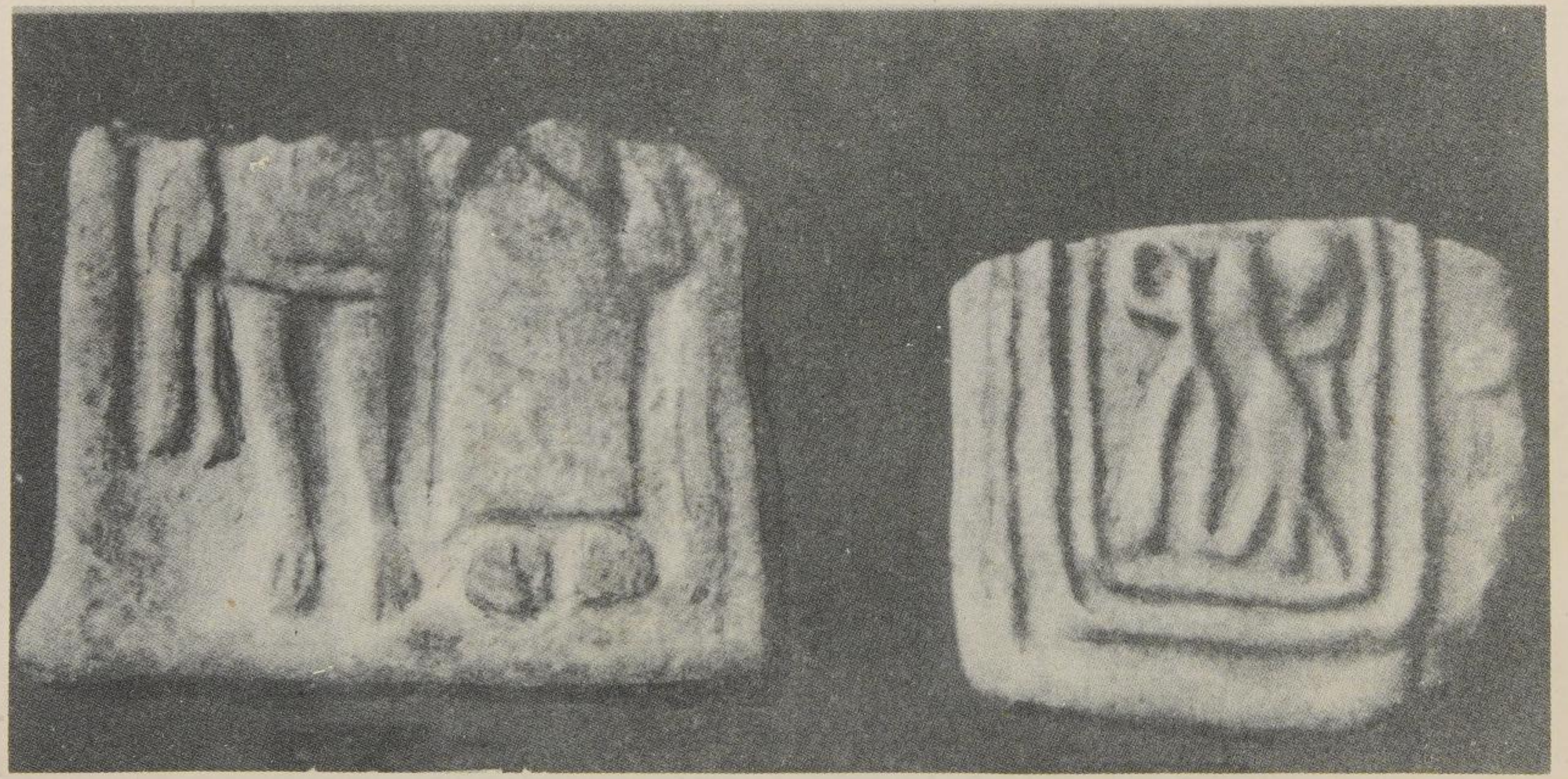

PLATE VIII, Nos. 1 & 2. SATTI-SATTA PLAQUES from Ahicchatra (A.D. 850–1100).

who were strongly opposed to this custom. Medhātithi on Manu[1] compares this practice to *śyenayāga*, which a man performed by way of black magic to kill his enemy. *Anumaraṇa* is denounced as suicide and in fact, forbidden to women. It is declared as *adharma*, *aśāstrīya* (not in accordance with the śāstras) by Śabara and others.[2] *Anvārohaṇa* is opposed to the Vedic text : "One should not leave the world before one has finished one's allotted span of life."[3] Thus the Brāhmaṇas were only allowed *anvārohaṇa*, but not *anumaraṇa*. Moreover, Smṛtis put restrictions on all widows. They unequivocally declare: "Wives, who have a child of tender years, who are pregnant, who have not attained puberty and who are in their monthly course do not mount the funeral pyre of their husbands."[4]

A woman who having first resolved to burn herself on the funeral pyre of her husband turned back from it at the last moment had to undergo the *prājāpatya* penance.[5] In the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*[6] we have one such instance. A queen having pretended to resolve on becoming *satī* ultimately regretted the step and turned back.

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Brāhmaṇa to the Cāṇḍāla provided they are not pregnant or they have no young children (at the time of husband's death). Also see Parāśara, IV. 32-32; *Brahmapurāṇa* (*Gautamīmāhātmya*), chap. 10, 76 & 74.

[1] V. 157 : "कामम् तु. . . ." etc.

[2] Śabara on *Jaiminī*, 1.1.2.

[3] For further details see Kane, *op. cit.*, 632-33.

[4] बालापत्याश्च गर्भिण्यो अदृष्टऋतवस्तथा
रजस्वला राजसुते नारोहन्ति चितां शुभे (*Bṛhannāradīya Purāṇa*, quoted in *Parāśaramādhavīya*, II, pt. I, p. 58 etc.)

[5] . . .चिति भ्रष्टा तु या नारी मोहाद्विचलिता ततः
प्रजापत्येन शुध्येत्तु तस्माद्वै पापकर्मणः (Āpastamba quoted by Aparārka, p. 1193 & *Śuddhi-tattva*, p. 243.)

[6] VI. 196.

After dwelling on the merits and demerits of this ancient rite, the other question that confronts us is: what was the procedure for widow-burning as enumerated in our ancient texts? Raghunandana in his *Sudhi-tattva* details the procedure in a quite interesting manner, which we quote below:

"The widow bathes and puts on two white garments, takes *kuśa* blades in her hands, faces the east or north, performs *ācamana* (sipping water); when the Brāhmaṇas say '*Om, tat sat*' she remembers the God Nārāyaṇa and refers to the time (month, fortnight, *tithi*) and then makes the *saṁkalpa* (declaration of resolve). She then calls upon the eight *lokapālas* (guardians of the quarters), the Sun, the moon, the fire etc., to become witnesses to her act of following her husband on the funeral pyre; she then goes round the fire thrice, then the Brahmaṇa recites the vedic verse *imā nārīr* etc. (*Ṛg.*, X. 18.7) and a Purāṇa verse, '*may these very good and holy women who are devoted to their husbands enter fire together with the body of the husband*'; the woman utters *namo namaḥ* and ascends the kindled pyre."[1] Raghunandana's interpretation of the Ṛgvedic *mantra* (*ārohantu jalayonimagne*: let them ascend the watery seat or origin, O fire) is, however, controversial. That formula according to other authorities, was really not addressed to widows at all, but to the ladies of the deceased man's household whose husbands were living, and the *Āśvalāyana Gṛhyasūtra* also uses it in the same sense. We have again the description of this procedure in Kamalākarabhaṭṭa's *Nirṇaya-sindhu* (17th cent. ?) (whose mother became a *satī*) wherein he pays "a very tender and touching reverence

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[1] vide., Kane, *op. cit.*, App. under 1484; Also see Colebrooke, *Miscellaneous Essays*, vol. i (1837 Ed.), pp. 114-16.

to her memory" which is somewhat different and it is followed by the *Dharmasindhu*.[1]

All these instances, when read together, show that the burning of the widows was a rare occurrence, and that the people were neither very keen on observing the practice nor had any deep-rooted convictions about its absolute religious necessity in those days and after.

Coming to the mediaeval age we find that the institution of *satī* was respected and held in high esteem by a section of society, particularly the Hindus, all over the country. Our mediaeval literature is full of instances of *satī*. As Radhakrishnan observes: "in the matter of vegetarian food and the non-marriage of widows even the lowest classes imitate the highest. With the increase of confusion, instances of *satī* also increased, but all through protests were uttered."[2] Bāṇa in his *Kādambarī* declares: "This is a path followed by the illiterate, is a manifestation of infatuation, a course of ignorance, an act of fool-hardiness and shortsightedness, stumbling through stupidity, that life is put an end to, when a parent, brother, sister, husband is dead..... If it be properly considered, this suicide has a selfish object, because it is intended to obviate the unendurable sorrow of bereavement."[3] We have thus views for and against this age-old practice propounded by classical writers all through the ages.

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[1] *Nirṇayasindhu*, III, uttarārdha, p. 623 & *Dharmasindhu*, 483-84. The Gauḍa procedure is said to be different from the one described in the *Nirṇayasindhu*. For other details, see P. V. Kane, *op. cit.*, pp. 634-35.

[2] *Religion and Society*, pp. 13 ff.

[3] *Kādambarī*, (ed., P. V. Kane), *pūrvabhāga*, para 177:

यदेतदनुमरणं नाम तदति निष्फलम्....
अन्याश्च रक्षः सुरासुरमुनिमनुजसिद्धगन्धर्व
कन्यका भर्तृरहिताः श्रूयन्ते सहस्रशो विधृतजीविताः

## Epigraphic Instances

We have numerous epigraphic records referring to the practice of *satī* in ancient as well as in mediaeval times. The earliest one is in 191 of the Gupta era (A.D. 510) in the Gupta inscription, i.e., the Eran posthumous inscription of Goparāja[1] (wherein it is said that his wife followed him on the pyre after his death in the battle against the Hūṇas). Nepal inscriptions[2] of A.D. 705 (wherein Rājyavatī, widow of Dharmadeva, bids her son Mahādeva to take up the reins of government so that she may follow her husband), the Belataru inscription[3] of Śaka 979 of the time of Rājendra Cola Deva and several other inscriptions clearly point to this custom as coming into general use, at least among the ruling classes, in India under the Guptas, the Vardhanas and their successors till the coming of the Muslims in the 9th century A.D. We have also several examples of men who killed themselves, out of devotion to their masters or for other causes, referred to in Chapter III. Besides, there are also instances of how stone-monuments, called *masti-kal* (*māsti-kallu* or *māstigallu*), i.e., stone-monument

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[1] Fleet, *CII*, Vol. III, p. 91; *IA*, IX, 164; Sircar, *Select Inscriptions*, Vol. I, pp. 335-36, verse 4:

कृत्वा च युद्धं सुमहत्प्रकाशं
स्वर्ग्गं गतो दिव्य न (रे) न्द्र-कल्पः
भक्तानुरक्ता च प्रिया च कान्ता
भार्य्याविलग्नानुगताग्नि राशिम्

This is probably the earliest epigraphic reference to the *satī*. The battle referred to here may represent a phase of the struggle between the Guptas and the Hūṇas in Central India. (*Ibid.*, p. 336, fn. 9).

The inscription is also referred to as the "Eraṇ Stone Pillar Inscription of the time of Bhānugupta."

[2] For Nepal inscriptions see *IA*, IX, pp. 163 ff.

[3] *EI*, VI, p. 213.

for *mahāsatī*, and *vīra-kal* (*vīrakallu* or *vīragallu*) for brave and devoted men, were erected in memory of *satīs* and men.[1]

Whether the practice was Dravidian or Aryan in origin it can not be said for certain but we have instances of it occurring pretty frequently in South India; the earliest known, of a historical character, being the death of the wife of Bhūta Pāṇḍya, an early celebrity in Tamil literature. One poem ascribed to her is to be found in the collection known as *Puranānūṛu*. Thus, there is a numerous class of archaeological monuments in South India, known as *Vīrakal* and *Mastikal* referred to above. The latter term represents *mahāsatī-kal*, i.e., a stone erected in memory of one who performed a *mahāsatī*, or act of self-immolation by a woman on the pyre of her husband.[2] The former is a stone erected in memory of a man who displayed valour, either on the fields of battle or by some other act of personal courage, of which we have cited numerous instances in the previous chapter.

The Belataru inscription of the time of Rājendra-coladeva records the interesting story of a Śūdra woman, Dekabbe, who is said to have burnt herself, on hearing the death of her husband, in spite of strong protests and opposition from her parents and relations. When she burnt herself, her parents erected a fine monument to her.[3] The epigraph is important as it is perhaps the first inscription concerning the "self-immolation of a Śūdra wife after her husband's death."[4] Moreover,

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[1] *IA*, XXXV, p. 129-30 (vide., the paper, "Satī-immolation which is not Satī").

[2] *Ibid.*, XXXV, 129.

[3] *EI*, VI, p. 213; *Ep. Circ.*, IV, Hg. No. 18.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 213.

the remarkable thing to take note of in this connection is that there is no pyre (*citā*, *citi*, *cityā*, the *tadbhava* form of which is *sidige* in Kannada), but a *koṇḍa* (*tadbhava* of the Sanskrit word *Kuṇḍa*), a hole in the ground for any fire, especially for the pyre of a burnt oblation. This *satī* has been further compared to *Śrī*, *Gaurī*, *Śaci*, *Sītā*, *Rati* and similar other Hindu goddesses.

We have another grant of Śaka 1103 (A.D. 1181) to a temple by Sinda Mahāmaṇḍaleśvara Rācamalla on a request by two *satīs*[1]—Bailiyakka and Malapāṇiyakka—both widows of his general Bacirāja. Another inscription of Cedi saṁvat 919 refers to three queens who became *satīs*.[2] The Temara gate stone-inscription of Śaka saṁvat 1246 (1324 A.D.) speaks of one Māṇikyadevī as becoming *satī*[3] on the death of her husband, Āmaṇa, an executive officer of the glorious Hariścandradeva. The Mistra Deoli Inscription[4] in Jodhpur refers to two queens of a Gohila Rāṇā as having become *satīs*. We have, besides, numerous references to *satī*-records of Śaka 1362 and 1365.[5] One of these *satī*-records was found in a village named Bamhanī of the Damoh district (U.P.) and is dated 1365 saṁvat. From this it appears that the last king of the Candella dynasty of Jejābhukti was Hammīravarmadeva who apparently held sway until A.D. 1309.[6] In another

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[1] *Ibid.*, XIV, pp. 265-67.
[2] *Ibid.*, XX, p. 168.
[3] *Ibid.*, X, p. 39.: "श्रीमाणिक्यद्वे (देवी) अग्नौ प्रविश्य (कल्यान्तं) . . ."
[4] *EI*, XX, p. 58.
[5] *EI*, XVI, p. 10, fn. 4 & p. 11, fn. 2.
[6] It reads as follows :

परमभेटारकेणाधिराजवलीत्रयोपेतकालीज्यराधिपति श्रीमद हंमीरवर्म्मदेव: विजयराज्ये संवत् १३६५ समये महाराजपुत्र श्रीवाघदेवभुज्यमाने अस्मिन काले वर्तमाने (:) ब्रह्मणीग्रामेभूमिपुत्र पाल्हण भार्जा मल्है संतम हथुसीधि पुत्र जामे पटुमणक्ववत्रा: पं जैपाल लिखितोस्ति (*EI*, XVI, p. 10, fn. 4).

village named Salaiyā, 3 miles from Bamhanī, there are two *satī*-records, one dated in A.D. 1304 and the other in 1309, the former erected during the reign of Vāghadeva and the latter in that of Alā-ud-dīn, indicating that the Parihāra Candella rule had come to an end in A.D. 1310, through the Muhammedan invasion. One of them is lying on a hillock and its date roughly corresponds to Monday, the 9th March 1304.[1] The second one lying in a field reads as follows: *saṁvat* 1366 *samaye Alayadīna sutānā rājya Baliakheṭa grāme*.[2] Both the stones are put on the border of a deserted village, Arhaiya Kheda, which is identical with Baliakheṭa of the Mahoba plates of Paramardi-Deva, v.s. 1230.[3] We have another *satī*-record in Pāṭan (District Jubbulpore[4]) of Śaka 1361 and another of Śaka 1366 at Singorgarh.[5] Further we have a very interesting article on "Satī-Memorial Stones."[6] It shows at length how the memorial stones usually bear the figure of the upraised arm and of the Sun and the Moon on either side and a group of stars.

The Karṇāṭaka inscriptions also throw some in-

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[1] This *satī* record reads as follows:

संवत १३६२ समये चैत्र सुदि २ सोमे महाराजपुत्र श्रीवाघदेव भुज्यमाने वलियाखे गामे (:) पटगोल्हण सुत मामे काल भवति भार्ज ताल्हा महासती भवंति (:) सुत चौहउनानिम कीर्ति पालयैः प० जैपाल (लिखितोस्तिः भड्र(ड)-मामी श्री लउटनान्वे गढ़ोस्ति (*Ibid.*, p. 11, fn. 2).

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 11, fn. 2.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

[4] This *satī*-record in Pāṭan reads as follows:

संवत १३६१ समये प्रतिहार रा श्रीवाघदेव भुजमाने ततकाल कायस्थ पं० अत्षार (?) (धा) व्रह्म यथा नर्मदातीर्थे प्रसति तौद्रिम (?) ग्रामे समाकुने जगहथ उधतं माघ वदि १३ सुक्रे (*Ibid.*, p. 11, fn. 1).

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 11, fn. 2, also see *Dameh Dīpaka*, p. 109.

[6] *JBORS*, XXIII, p. 430 ff. (vide., Walsh's paper, "Virakal and Satī-Memorial Stones at Budhpur and Buram").

teresting light on the state of *satī* in that part of the country. We have in them only eleven cases of *satī* during the period 1000-1400 A.D. and forty-one cases during 1400-1600 A.D. Most of these *satīs* belonged to the Nāyaka and Gauḍa classes who formed the main fighting community of South India. Besides these, two belong to the Jaina sect.[1] We have in them, however, very few cases of Brāhmaṇa widows becoming *satīs*. Further, we have a Mysore inscription referring to a lady as going forth to the fire-pit to die (to become a *satī*).[2] A thirteenth century Tamil inscription contains the passionate outpourings of the heart of a young childless widow, afraid of the woes and ill-treatment in store for her, after the death of her husband, by her near relatives.[3] This was one of the many potent causes in later times that prompted a widow to end her life rather than face hellish existence after the death of her husband.

In the villages of Budhpur and Burām (Manbhum district in Bihar) there are several stones referred to as *satī* pillars. Some of them are inscribed, but all are more or less sculptured; the general subjects appear to be a man drawing a bow, sometimes on horse-back, but more often on foot, showing that the husbands of those in whose memories these pillars stand were warriors slain in battle. Most of them have animals also, sculptured in the topmost compartment.

In the village of Budhpur, there are a few *satī*-pillars; two of them were inscribed, but the weather

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[1] *Epigraphia Carnatica*, vol. viii, Soral Nos. 106 & 261 dated 1376 & 1408 respectively.

[2] *Ibid.*, vol. iv, 2 Hg. No. 18.

[3] For details see *South Indian Epigraphical Reports*, 1907, p. 77; Altekar, *op. cit.*, p. 161, fn. 1.

has not left the writing legible, and whatever is spared has been destroyed purposely by the chisel. On the first one, the only word legible is *Yuva-rāja* and in the second, which is also the last line, the first line is illegible.[1] As a matter of fact, the district of Manbhum contains numerous monuments of a peculiar sort, but of a much later date which are crude stone carvings, and are placed here and there in front of the temples. Some of these stones have been described as *satī*-monuments, but are evidently put up as temple-wardens, just as in modern houses similar figures are painted near the door.[2] All authorities, from Prinsep to Cunningham onwards, have, without exception, considered them to be either *Vīrakal* (monuments to warriors killed in battle, or in some cases in hunting wild beasts) or *satī* memorials. Jayaswal has dated the inscriptions on these monuments from the form of the letters as being 700 A.D. and 1000 A.D.[3]

These *Vīrakal* and *satī* monuments are of great interest as they show examples of weapons and accoutrements, the method of doing the hair, and other particulars of different periods and localities, and in some cases they refer to the names of the rulers and states or districts of the times.[4] The inscription on one of these *satī*-stones partially reads: *Rājaputra Śrī Vaḍadhuga* (*Chaḍadhuga*) and may be dated 900-1000 A.D.[5] Seven of these stones have been described by Walsh[6] (see Pl. I).

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[1] *JBORS*, XXIII, p. 431.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 433.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 434.
[4] For full description of the Budhpur stones, see *Ibid.*, p. 436-42.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 438.
[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 436 ff.

To the east of this row of monuments there are two smaller stones side by side. The one to the right has a kneeling female figure similar to the small panels on (3), (4) and (5).[1] The figure has a number of bracelets on both arms; there are six on the left arm which is better preserved and there are traces of an inscription on the base of this stone.

The other stone is broken but has had a footman—only the legs and *dhoti* remain. There is an inscription on the base of this stone.

Stones nos. 3, 4 and 5 (Pls. I-II) containing the figure of a female in a small panel and no. 5A bearing only a female figure are *satī*-memorials. On two of these we have an inscription. The one reads : *Gharavatī Dhruvakasya* ("wife of Dhruvaka") and is dated 1000 A.D.[2]

The other reads : *Rāja-mātae Vaḍa dhuch* (?) or the king's mother Vaḍa dhuca (dhucā), and is dated 700 A. D.[3] They were probably local chieftains (vide., Pls. I-II).

The village of Buraṁ (Manbhum District) is also rich in such memorial stones. Some of these are *Vīra-kal* memorials, but *satī*-stones have not been referred to, which shows that they were not standing at the time of Mr. Beglar's visit to Buram in 1872,[4] who has described all these temples and monuments at length. They are of grey granite and are much worn, and the features of the faces are entirely worn away and belong to the 13-14th cent. A.D.[5]

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[1] *vide.*, Pls. I & II.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 439.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 439.
[4] *ASIR*, viii, p. 135.
[5] For other details, see *JBORS*, xxiii, pp. 442-43.

The sacred shrine of Sampati Satī is yet another hallowed place of pilgrimage on the banks of the Gaṅgā in Barh in the district of Monghyr, Bihar, which was erected on the spot on the cremation ground in November, 1928, where Sampati Kuar of village Berhanā, a few miles away from Barh (now a railway station on the Howrah-Moghulsarai line) was forcibly burnt on the funeral pyre of her husband by her relatives who were later prosecuted and severely punished. But even to-day the shrine of Sampati continues to be a sacred place of pilgrimage all the year round, and the citizens of Barh talk in hushed whispers of miracles effected as a result of prayers offered at that hallowed place.

Besides the above stones, a number of small plaques showing a man and a woman together were found during the excavations of 1940-44 on the site of Ahicchatrā (District Bareilly, U.P.) described as *Satī-Sattā Plaques* (Type 33 : Terracotta figurines), belonging to A.D. 850-1100,[1] except one assigned to A.D. 650-750. The plaques are thin and rectangular, half of them having rounded tops, and all are made from shallow moulds. The male and female figures stand facing, with the left hand of the male and the right hand of the female figure crossed at the back and placed on each other's shoulder. The male figure usually stands on the left but in three cases (No. 325 and two more not illustrated here), the position is reversed. The relief is invariably superficial, with no attention to details of ornaments or drapery. The style is crude, showing similarity with the figures on *satī*-stones.

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[1] V. S. Agrawal, "Terracotta figurines of Ahicchatrā, District Bareilly, U.P." in *Ancient India*, No. 4, p. 178, Pl. LXX B.

The plaques served a votive purpose being used as offerings near *satī*-stones at places, called *satī-caurā* (places where images of *satī* are installed and regularly worshipped by people). The couples on the *satī*-pillars in Bundelkhand, where they still abound, are known as *Satī-Sattā*, a term which has been adopted to designate figures of this type (Nos. 323-28).[1] It may be suggested here that people use the term *Sattā* for those heroes or otherwise on whose funeral pyre, their wives burnt themselves. Although the term seems a misnomer, yet it is popular with the simple folk in the area.

The stratigraphical evidence supported by the style shows the figures to belong to the advanced mediaeval period. In fourteen specimens the woman wears a petticoat (lañhgā) as was worn by the Rajput women of that age. Out of thirty-seven pieces, thirty-four are assignable to 9th-11th centuries. No. 323 is an exception, showing an earlier style (about the eighth century). One flat plaque rests on two pairs of small legs. No. 328 shows the two figures treated almost in outline.[2]

As a matter of fact, *Vīrakal* and *satī*-memorial stones are found in many places throughout India. The *satī*-memorials in some cases, in addition to the human figures depicted, "bear an upraised arm and hand, with the sun and moon on either side" (referred to above) as being perpetual witnesses to the Satī's offering; in some cases the hand holds a lime-fruit between the thumb and the fore-finger. This is what is alluded to in old inscriptions where women are said to "have

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[1] *Ibid.*, Pl. LXXB (Pls. VI-VIII in this book.)

[2] For other details, see *Ibid.*, p. 178. vide., Pl. VIII.

given arm and hand." In some cases, this symbol of the upraised hand with sun and moon alone appears. In other cases, there is the figure of a snake, indicating the house-hold deity. In still other cases, there is a niche in the monument for a lamp which is known as "Dewali" (Dīwālī). The earliest example is a pillar at Balod in the Central Provinces, now in the Nagpur Museum. This stone had served as a memorial of three successive *satīs* and bears three inscriptions. The two later inscriptions are worn off, but the earliest remains. The characters of this inscription, according to Prinsep, belong to the 2nd cent. A.D.[1] We have got one such epigraph at Eran which is dated in the Gupta year 191, i.e., A.D. 510-11.[2] One at Baro in Mālwā is dated by Cunningham as of the 9th or 10th century.[3] Another at Satanwara is dated saṁvat 1016, i.e., A.D. 959.[4] One at Hindoŕial in the Damoh district of the Central Provinces is dated A.D. 1056[5] and one at Saura in Jubbulpur district, saṁvat 1355 and śaka 1220, i.e., 1298 A.D.[6] The earliest *satī*-stone discovered in Rajputana goes back to 838 A.D., and there are many others which attest to its prevalence only after the latter half of the ninth century A.D. The majority of the old stones, however, belong to the twelfth or thirteenth centuries.

They are very numerous in the Mysore Province and the Saugor district of the Central Provinces. Khimlas, an old town 41 miles from Saugor, contains perhaps the largest number of these stones, 51 of which are

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[1] *ASIR*, vol. vii, pp. 136-37.
[2] *Ibid.*, vol. xx, p. 45.
[3] *Ibid.*, vol. x, p. 75.
[4] *Ibid.*, vol. vii, p. 94.
[5] *Ibid.*, vol. ix, p. 53.
[6] *Ibid.*, vol. ix, p. 41.

inscribed. Almost all of them are dated, the dates ranging from saṁvat 1510 (1453 A.D.) to saṁvat 1880 (1823 A.D.)[1] A peculiarity of the *satī*-monuments is that nearly all of them are placed on the western bank either of a stream or of a reservoir with faces towards the east.[2] Perhaps the finest examples of such monuments are the memorials of uncertain date of the Maṇḍī Rājas bearing inscriptions, which record the date of each rāja's death, and of the number of queens, concubines, and slave-girls who were burned (forcibly) on his pyre. "Even more grim than these are the graveyards in which such memorials venerated by the Rājputs stand; each sacred spot termed "the place of great sacrifice" is the haunted ground of legendary love. Among the altars on which have burned the beauteous and the brave, the harpy (*Ḍākinī*) takes up her abode and stalks forth to places of silence but to perform stated rites or anniversary offerings of flowers and water to the manes (*pitṛ-deva*) of his ancestors."[3] The wife of Dāhir, king of Sind, also became a *satī* when her husband was defeated and killed by Muhammad-bin-Kasim, the general of the Muslim ruler, Hajjāja, in the ninth century A.D.

The practice of *satī* was an established institution in Mithilā or North Bihar, during the mediaeval period (16th-18th cent. A.D.). In spite of several attempts made by Akbar and Jahangir to suppress or regulate the rite it continued to flourish as before. The Brāhmaṇa priest played a prominent part in the *satī* rites.

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[1] *Ibid.*, vol. ix, p. 45.

[2] *Ibid.* vol. ix, p. 41. For other details, see *JBORS*, vol. xxiii, pp. 429-43.

[3] Crooke, *Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India*, pp. 155-56.

A woman who was about to practice *satī* was not allowed to be touched and thus defiled by a non-Hindu. The queen of Rājā Puruṣottama Ṭhākura of the Khaṇḍavalā dynasty of Mithilā, is stated to have practised *satī* on the death of her husband. Rāghava-priyā, wife of Rājā Rāghava Siṁha of the same dynasty, also burnt herself on the funeral pyre of her husband. There is yet a *satī*-temple (Maṭha) extant on the place of her funeral, to the south of Bhaurāgarhī (the fortress of Bhaura of the Khaṇḍavalā kings). There are no images of gods in the temple except two small clay-mounds. There is also a big tank there known as *satī-āḍa*. People of the sorrounding villages call the goddess as *satī-māi* (Mother *Satī*), worship her as village-goddess and offer their oblations. But from all accounts it appears that *satī* was practised mostly by the women of the upper classes—Kṣatriyas and Brāhmaṇas. None the less, the practice does not seem to have been so widely current in Mithilā as in Bengal and elsewhere.[1]

The most interesting of all is that people valued highly the blessing given by a *satī* on her way to death. It was also generally believed that her curses brought almost ruin on those against whom they happened to be directed. People nourished so much of faith in their words that in Mārwār even today the most solemn of all oaths is that on *satī*.[2]

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[1] Covered in greater detail in the author's forthcoming publication, *History of Mithilā*, vol. ii, chap. v.

[2] For several eye-witness accounts of *satī*, see Bernier's *Travels*, pp. 304-15; Colebrooke, *Miscellaneous Essays*, vol. i (1837 Ed.), pp. 114-116; vol. ii, chap. iii, pp. 153-58; *ABORS*, XIV, p. 219; *Travels of Peter Mundy* (pub. Hakluyt Society in 1914), vol. ii, pp. 34-36 etc.

## Other Instances

In later times the sacrifice came to be believed as purifying the family of the father, mother and husband of the widow. If her husband died in a foreign country she was recommended to take his sandals or some other article of his dress, to bind them on her breast, and after purification, to ascend the pyre. This practice was very common among the Rājputs, as well as the terrible rite of *Jauhar*, as is proved by the numerous grave-stones scattered all over Central India. When Jaswant died beyond the Atak, his wife, the mother of Ajit, determined to burn with her lord, but being in the seventh month of her pregnancy she was forcibly prevented from doing so. His other queen and seven concubines mounted the pyre; and "as soon as the tidings reached Jodhpur, queen Chandrāvatī, taking a turban of her late lord, ascended the pyre at Mundore...."[1] On the murder of Ajita Siṁha, his six queens and fifty-eight concubines mounted the funeral pyre. "The pile flamed like a volcano; the faithful queens laved their bodies in the flame as do the celestials in the lake of Mānasarovara."[2] Jaya Siṁha, the Mirza Raja, was also followed by some of his queens and concubines on his pyre.[3] Such instances are numerous in the annals of Rajasthan.[4] This custom prevailed most when the Rājputs enjoyed power and influence.[5] Jahangir also refers to this practice in his *Memoirs*[6]:

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[1] Todd, *Annals*, ii, p. 201.

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 370-71. For other details see Altekar, *op. cit.*, pp. 153-54.

[3] *Annals*, pp. 72-73.

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 371-72, 393-94. For details see Altekar, *op. cit.* pp. 153-54.

[5] For this practice among the Marāthas, see Altekar, p. 155.

[6] *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, vol. i, p. 20 ff.

"It is the custom among the Hindus that after the death of their husbands women burn themselves, whether from love, or to save the honour of their fathers, or from being shamed by their sons-in-law."

The Mohammedan rulers endeavoured, as much as they could, without offending their Hindu subjects, to prevent it. Muhammad Tughlaq tried to stop the practice of *satī*. Akbar the great, following him, condemned it and issued a decree that no woman should be burnt against her will, and that in one case he personally intervened to save the life of a Rajput lady—a daughter of Udaya Siṁha or Mota Rājā and the widow of Jayamala, a cousin of Rājā Bhagwan Das—who refused to be a *satī*. Akbar rode hastily to the spot and prevented her relatives from compelling her to burn herself on the funeral pyre of her husband.[1]

Amar Dās, the Sikh Guru, also condemned and prohibited it. The *Ādigrantha*[2] of the Sikhs says: "They are not *satīs* who perish in the flames, O Nānak: *satīs* are those who live on with a broken heart." These condemnations and protests may have partially succeeded for a time as a check, but on the whole they proved an utter failure. It could be banned and stopped only when strict legislations were enforced by the British rulers at a later date, which is dealt with later in the book.

## JAUHAR

The institution of *Jauhar* was another mediaeval institution which flourished side by side with that of *satī*. *Jauhar* is a name to conjure with in the history

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[1] Ishwari Prasad, *Muslim Rule*, p. 84.

[2] cf. The *Ādigrantha* of the Sikhs. Also see Altekar, *op. cit.*, pp. 154-55.

of mediaeval Hindu India. The very name spells magic and unfolds before our mind's eye a glorious chapter of Rajput heroism and their splendid sacrifices. It is a chapter written with the precious blood of the thousands of the Rajput ladies who gladly embraced flames to avoid captivity and save the honour of their families from the unspeakable atrocities at the hands of the victorious enemies, specially the Muslims. Words fail to describe this horrible yet glorious rite, and the history of mankind fails to offer any parallel to this otherwise common custom among the brave Rajputs, anywhere in any corner of the world at any time.

What was this *Jauhar* about? It was a rite, when performed, a whole tribe within a few hours became extinct. The fate of the Rajput princess was one of appalling hardship. In each stage of her life death was there to claim her—"by the poppy at its dawn; by the flames in riper years; while the safety of the interval depending on the uncertainty of war; at no period was her existence worth a twelve months purchase. The loss of the battle, or the capture of a city is a signal to avoid captivity and its horrors, which to the Rājpūtanī (Rajput ladies) are worse than death."[1] To avoid such degradation the brave Rajputs had recourse to the *Jauhar* or immolation of every female of the family or even the whole tribe if the occasion so demanded. That the ladies willingly and gladly embraced refuge from such a pollution can hardly be doubted.[2] The battered fortresses; the ruined heaps of walls; the forlorn palaces; the broken, dusty, dumb

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[1] Todd, *Annals*, vol. i, pp. 215, 249, 473, 507; vol. ii, 200, 609 etc.

[2] For other details, see *Ibid.* Also see Altekar, *op. cit.*, pp. 155-57.

bricks lying scattered here and there and every particle of dust flying in the thick air of Rajasthan have a blood-curdling history of their own to tell, only if they could speak. The Rajputs have long deserted the scene, but the tales of their heroic sacrifices are yet enshrined in the heart of every inhabitant of the land, full of pathos, full of indomitable bravery. Who would not be a Rajput in such a case?

When and how did the custom originate? It can be traced back to some thousand years before the dawn of Christianity, though not in the form as we know it today. Moreover, such sundry acts of heroism are to be found in the annals of most of the ancient civilisations which once germinated, blossomed, flowered and perished. In the history of celestial beings—Satī, the Dakṣa's daughter and Pārvatī[1], Lord Śiva's wife, etc.—the Rājputanī has a memorable lesson before her that no domestic differences can afford exemption from this proof of faith. According to James Todd, "female-immolation originated with the Sun-worshipping Śaivas and was common to all those who adored this, the most splendid object of the visible creation."[2] The chief characteristic of this sacrifice is its expiating quality, for, by this act of faith they not only made atonement for the sins of their husbands and secured the remission of their own but "had the joyful assurance of re-union to the object whose beatitude she procured."[3]

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[1] cf. the following verses in Kālidāsa's *Kumārasambhava*, I. 21-22:

अथावमानेन पितुः प्रयुक्ता दक्षस्यकन्याभवपूर्वपत्नी
सती सती योगविसृष्टदेहा तां जन्मने शैलवधूं प्रपेदे।
सा भूधराणामधिपेन तस्यां समाधिमत्यामुदपादि भव्या
सम्यक्प्रयोगादपरिक्षतायां नीताविवाहोत्साहगुणेन संपत्॥

[2] Todd, *op. cit.*, Vols. I-II.

[3] *Ibid.*

Having once imbibed this doctrine "its fulfilment is powerfully aided by that heroism of character inherent to the Rājpūtanī."[1]

*Jauhar* was in a sense a form of mass-suicide, of which we have numerous examples recorded in the annals of several other nations. "Suicides of this kind," remarks one writer, "amount to a sort of epidemic. Larger epidemics extending through an entire city, or even wider, have not been unknown in ancient or modern times, and are frequently associated with religious mania. These are probably hysterical, as hysteria is easily communicated and often produces, especially among women, 'threatrical attempts at suicide!'"[2] Russia furnished some remarkable examples. In 1666 A.D., whole communities hailed, with enthusiasm, "the gospel of death," first by starvation, then by famine and finally by fire. Similar was the practice among the early Germans, the Greeks and the Romans and others.

The heroic type of sacrifice—like *Jauhar*—committed to avoid intolerable shame, and thereby escape sexual dishonour, was also thoroughly consonant with the character of Republican Rome, and the Greeks. Legend goes how Leukadian rock (Greece) received its name from Leukatos, who, "to escape the unwelcome attentions of Apollo plunged into the sea of the island of Leukas."[3] Pausanias tells us how "the daughters of Skedasos of Leuktra hanged themselves to escape the violence offered them by certain Lacedaemonians."[4] Such suicides were also a prominent feature in the early

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[1] *Ibid.*
[2] Tanzi, *A Text-book of Mental Diseases*, p. 585.
[3] Serv. On Vergil, *AEN*, iii. 279; *ERE*, xii, 27.
[4] Pausanias, IX, xiii. 3.

history of Rome and we need hardly add that such deaths were always deemed as glorious ones.

In India also its origin can be traced as far back as the 4th century B.C. At the time of Alexander's invasion of India there were several independent republican states in the Punjab and the adjoining territories. Greek writers, who accompanied Alexander, have mentioned the Śibis, the Mālavas, the Kṣudrakas and other small republican tribes in their accounts. Alexander had to fight vehemently and defeat these peoples one by one. In the course of one such defeat, in one city alone some twenty thousand males, females and children embraced flames to escape captivity and dishonour at the hands of the foreign enemies. This is probably the first historical instance of that heroic sacrifice which later came to be renowned and respected as the rite of *Jauhar* in the history of mediaeval India. We have again instances of this practice during the early centuries of the Christian era. When the Śakas and the Hūṇas invaded the country, created terror and played havoc with the lives of the people, the princely families resorted to this practice to save the honour of their womenfolk.

But the living historic instances of this heroic sacrifice we have only in the annals of Rajasthan in mediaeval times. When Ala-ud-Din Khilji invaded Chitore, a funeral pyre was lighted within "the great subterranean retreat" in chambers impervious to the light of day and "the defenders of Chitore beheld in procession, the queen, their own wives and daughters to the number of several thousands. The fair Padmini closed the throng which was augmented by whatever of female beauty or youth could be tainted by Tatar lust. They were conveyed to the cavern, and the

opening closed upon them, leaving them to find security from dishonour in the devouring element."[1]

After the death of Rāṇā Sāṅgā, Chitore was again invaded and completely stormed by Bahadur Shah (1533 A.D.), only a few years after the first battle of Panipat (1526 A.D.). The bravest had fallen in defending the breach, now fully exposed. The defeat of the gallant Rajputs was writ large on the horizon of Chitore. There was no way out. The signal was given and the devastating flames flared up once again in the sky of Rajasthan. "Combustibles were quickly heaped up in reservoirs and magazines excavated in the rock under which gun-powder strewed. Karṇavati, mother of the Prince and sister of the gallant Arjun Har, led the procession of willing victims to their doom, and thirteen thousand females were thus swept at once from the record of life."[2] The terrible rite of *Jauhar* devoured its victims in the twinkling of an eye!

Again, at the time of Akbar's invasion of Marwar, the fatal *Jauhar* was commanded while "eight thousand Rajputs ate the last *bīrā* (*pān* or betel-leaves) together and put on their saffron robes. The gates were thrown open, and the work of destruction commenced. Nine gems, five princesses (their daughters), with two infant sons, and the families of all the chieftains not at their estates, perished in the flames or in the assault of this ever memorable day."[3] The history of Jasalmer furnishes yet another unique instance of the rite. When attacked by Sultan Alla-ud-Din the heroes inspired their princesses to save their honour and faith through the performance of *Jauhar* and to attain *svarga*. The

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[1] Todd, *op. cit.*, vol. i, pp. 215 ff.
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] *Ibid.*

ladies thereupon bade the last farewell to all their kin; the *Jauhar* commenced, and twenty-four thousand females, from infancy to old age, surrendered their lives, some by the sword, others in the volcano of fire. "Blood flowed in torrents, while the smoke of the pyre ascended to the heavens; not one feared to die, every valuable was consumed with them."[1]

Like *satī*-memorial stones described above, the performers of this rite were duly honoured and given a place of divinity in their household and worshipped like gods and goddesses in temples and shrines. For instance, we have the description of a sequestered spot in a deep of the rock near Udaipur, where there is a living fountain, known as *go-mukha* (or cow's mouth) under the shade of an umbrageous *baḍa* tree. On one side of the dale is the subterranean channel called *Rānī-bindār*, which, it is said, leads to suites of chambers in the rock. This was the scene of the awful *Jauhar*, on the occasion of Alla-ud-Din sacking Chitore when the queens perished in the flames; on which the cavern's mouth was closed. The place is yet visited by a large number of devotees.[2] There are numerous such places in Rajasthan where the ashes of the heroes were enshrined. Besides these, we have numerous instances of this great heroic sacrifice in the history of the Rajputs.

From an unpublished Persian document we learn that Rajasthan was not the only part of India where the rite of *Jauhar* was practised. It had spread to other parts of India as well, for instance, Bihar. The document gives a geneology of the rulers of Chautham, paraganā Farakiyā in the district of Monghyr and des-

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[1] *Ibid.*, ii, pp. 200-01.
[2] *Ibid.*, ii, pp. 609-10.

cribes the many vicissitudes in their fortunes. In this connection we are told that in 961 Sana (c. 1556 A.D.) a battle was fought between Murārasāhī and Vedasāhī in which the former was killed and consequently all the ladies of his *hàvelī* (inner apartment) died by jumping into the fire-pit especially prepared for the occasion. We have then other details with which we are not concerned here but the document is very important for (i) we have clear evidence of the prevalence of the rite of *Jauhar* in Bihar and (ii) we have it for the first time that this rite was not confined to the Rajputs only, but also to other castes, such as Bhūmihārs who happened to be the owners of Chautham in this case. In other words, the rite of *Jauhar* had in course of time assumed national importance and fighting communities and landed aristocracy, wherever they be, had adopted this sacred rite as their own.[1]

So goes the thrilling tale of *Jauhar*—bloodiest yet the most shining chapter in the history of our land.

## End of Jauhar

With the fall of the Muslim rule in India and the end of the Rajput supremacy the institution of *Jauhar* became quite extinct. The Rajputs, though they had to fight incessant wars against the British rulers, were, however, meted out generous and hero-like treatment by the victors who always respected their sentiments and the sanctity of their womenfolk. *Jauhar* was, in a sense, a spontaneous outburst of violent reaction against the barbarous atrocities perpetrated by the

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[1] The document was procured by my revered friend Prof. Radhakrishna Chaudhary, G. D. College, Begusarai, from the owners of Chautham (Manghyr) which he kindly allowed me to utilise. The photostet of the document is in possession of Prof. Choudhary and its language is Urdu in Persian script.

brute conquerors who felt no scruples in molesting even the womenfolk. Thus, with the tumbling down of the Muslim sceptres and crown, this practice naturally ceased to exist.

## SATĪ IN MUSLIMS

But the practice of *satī* still continued. The most interesting of all was the prevalence of the custom of *satī* in a section of the Muslims of India—a practice which it is impossible to find anywhere else in the Muslim world.

The people of Rajaur (near Kashmir) were Muslims at the time of Jahangir. It is said they were in old times Hindus whom Sultan Firuz converted to Islam. But they were still called Rājās. Jahangir in his *Memoirs*[1] observes that they still had "the marks of the times of ignorance. One of those is that just as some Hindu women burn themselves along with their husbands (bodies), so these women (the Rajaur-women) are put into the grave along with their (dead) husbands. I heard that they recently put alive into the grave a girl of ten or twelve along with her (dead) husband who was also of the same age."[2]

Jahangir condemned this practice among the local Muslims and issued a decree that "hereafter they should not do such things, and whoever was guilty of them, should be capitally punished."[3]

This is, in all probability, a singular instance of the practice of *satī* among the Muslims.

## SATĪ IN MODERN INDIA

The rite of *satī* gradually reached its climax in

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[1] *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, vol. ii, p. 181.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 181.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 181.

modern India, during the early years of the East India Company's rule. The fall of the Mughal Empire accelerated the wheel that had become rusty and motionless for some time. It is very difficult to find out the causes of this terrible increase but it can be said with certainty that the increase of confusion in the society was ultimately responsible for the increase in the instances of *satī* which now came to be respected as an object of veneration, an object of chastity and a very high ideal of womanhood—an ideal to cherish and follow.

The *Jauhar* of the great Rajputs was gone and was no longer in practice, but the ideal of *satī*, another form of *Jauhar*, still held its own and was regarded as a great object of worship and veneration. The females of the Bhuttee tribe among the Rajputs in Central India were the most prompt to sacrifice themselves. It was, as a matter of fact, a thing of honour with most of them not to outlive their husbands. Among the well-known historical examples of *satī* in the 18th century (1772 A.D.) was that of Ramabai, wife of the Peshwa Madhava Rao I.[1]

The Marathas (Mahrattas), after having acquired paramount power in Central India by "a policy of wise neglect and indifference," rendered this practice rare. Writing in 1832 A.D. John Malcolm observed: "in the whole of Central India there have not been above three or four *satīs* annually for the last twenty years. They are much limited to particular tribes of Brahmins and Rajputs; and it is consolatory to add that those shocking scenes which still occur, on the death of the princes of Jayapur, Jodhpur and Udaipur, to swell

[1] J. Malcolm, *Memoir of Central India*, vol. ii (1832). For details, see Altekar, *op. cit.*, pp. 162 ff.

those funeral honours, numbers of unwilling females are forcibly thrown upon the pile, are unknown to this country."[1] The Namboodiri, the most orthodox Brāhmaṇas of Malabar, also did not permit it or the shaving of the widow's head.

From all accounts of travellers and other writers[2] it appears that of all the places in India, widow-burning prevailed most in Bengal, during the centuries immediately preceding its abolition. From the contemporary accounts we learn that during 1815-28 the Bengal Presidency, which then included Bengal and extended upto Benares, recorded the highest figures for *satī*.[3] In 1815 the lowest figure was 378 whereas in 1818 the highest figure was 839. "Out of the total of 2,366 cases during the four years (1815-18), the Calcutta division alone contributed 1,435; the Benares division,

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[1] *Ibid.*

[2] Edward Thomson in his work *Suttee* has given an account of this rite from the most ancient times to the days of the British. The author, in an appendix, gives extracts from the accounts of those who witnessed widow-burning from 317 B.C. to 1845 A.D. Max Muller in his *History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature* (1859) refers to the custom of widow-burning among Greeks and Scythians (p. 48). M. Winternitz in his *Die Frau im Brahmanismus* (1920, Leipzig) gives accounts of travellers and eye-witnesses (pp. 74-79). Colebrooke gives a description of the rite in his *Miscellaneous Essays*, vol. i (ed. of 1837), pp. 114-116 and vol. ii, chap. iii, pp. 153-58. We have further references to this rite in *ABORS*, XIV, 219. The *Travels of Peter Mundy* (published by the Hakluyt Society in 1914), vol. ii, pp. 34-36, gives an account of the burning of a widow at Surat in 1630 with a sketch which shows the widow having on her lap the head of her deceased husband. The author further says that the practice had become rare in his time as a special license from the Ruler or the Governor had to be obtained under the Mughals. ' Barbosa, a Portuguese traveller, also describes the burning of a *satī* in the Vijayanagar Kingdom (vide., trans. by M.L. Dames, vol. i, pp. 213-16). Bernier's *Travels* also furnish us with several instances of *satī*.

[3] Thomson, *Suttee*, pp. 69, 72.

the seat of orthodoxy, contributed only 343."[1] Wilson has given a table of the number of *satīs* for 1815-28. From this table we know that in 1828 there were 423 cases of *satī*, out of which 420 came from Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. This figure (i.e., 1,420) included 287 from the Calcutta division alone.[2]

We reproduce below a few cuttings of typical news-items concerning *sahamaraṇa* or *satī* published in some of the Calcutta journals of the time (i.e., 19th century), which throw a vivid light on the practice widely current in Bengal and elsewhere :

(i) "Calcutta, June 3, (1819)—This year in the district of Hoogly one hundred cases of *sahamaraṇa* took place. Last year it was two hundred. Its cause is not known. Compared to other districts, the Hoogly district records much more cases daily.

"In Western India, cases of *sahamaraṇa* are few, say, rare. In that part of India there are several villages where people are familiar only with its name, but have hardly seen it occurring with their own eyes. Even if such cases occur there, a *mañca* is erected on the bank of the Ganges as a symbol, a memorial. But, among the Rajputs cases of *sahamaraṇa* often take place. Only last year, a prince died there, and with him his thirty-three wives burnt alive."[3]

(ii) "Calcutta, March 27 (1819)—In the city of Calcutta, a Brāhmaṇa expired, and his young wife practised *satī* (*sahamaraṇa*). We are told that the body of her deceased husband was kept preserved for two days, and on the third day she practised *satī*. We

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 72.
[2] Wilson, *History of India*, vol. iii, p. 189.
[3] B. N. Bandopadhyaya, *Saṁvāda patre se kālera kathā* (Bengali), vol. i, pp. 10 ff.

never heard of such a long delay before. We are further told that the delay thus caused was due to the dispute over her age. According to the great Hindu Paṇḍitas, a girl less than 16 years of age, or a pregnant woman or a woman with a little son are not entitled to practise *sahamaraṇa*.

"The Hindu Śāstra says, *sahamaraṇa* never gives a wife *nirvāṇa*; it, however, gives her material pleasure.

"*Sahamaraṇa* is practised more in Bengal than any other place in India. In Western India, not even the fourth part of it occurs. In the district under Calcutta Court Appeal cases of *sahamaraṇa* are much more frequent. Moreover, in the Hoogly district alone, one-seventh of the cases of *sahamaraṇa* occurring in the whole of India, takes place."[1]

(iii) "Calcutta, Aug. 16 (1823)—On Tuesday there appeared a news-letter in the columns of the *Calcutta Journal* regarding *satī*, from Śāntipur. The letter says that a beautiful young girl of 18 decided to practise *sahamaraṇa* on the death of her husband. She came down to the bank of the Ganges near Śāntipur, along with the corpse of her husband. On the receipt of this news the Thanedar (Sub-Inspector of Police) of Śāntipur, along with his several other men, rushed to the spot to prevent her from practising *sahamaraṇa*. He enquired of the girl as to why she was bent upon burning herself on the funeral pyre of her husband: 'was it the fear of poverty or the fear of the fury of the family members?' To these queries she replied that her husband had left enough for her maintenance and that no one was putting any pressure on her either. She was doing so, because only then she

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[1] *Ibid.*

would be able to join her husband and stay with him eternally. This heavenly or divine pleasure (*svarga-bhoga*) she would be denied if she refrained from practising *satī*.

"When words or arguments failed to convince or impress her, they brought her two little sons before her. But even the sight of the boys could not move her or arouse her motherly affection. The Thanedar tried his best, appealed to her motherhood in the name of her two sons, but of no avail.

"She then performed certain preliminary rites, lay down beside the dead body of her husband and embraced him. His relations then came forward, tied both of them into one, and set fire to it."[1]

(iv) "Calcutta, March 23 (1822)—Below is a table recording comparative figures for *satī* during the years 1815-17 :

| | 1815 | 1816 | 1817 |
|---|---|---|---|
| "Interior Calcutta .. | 253 | 289 | 441 |
| Dacca .. .. .. | 31 | 24 | 52 |
| Murshidabad .. .. | 11 | 22 | 42 |
| Patna .. .. .. | 20 | 29 | 39 |
| Benares .. .. .. | 48 | 65 | 103 |
| Bareilly .. .. .. | 17 | 13 | 19 |
| | 380 | 442 | 696."[2] |

The staggering magnitude of this practice can be judged from the fact that in 1823 A.D. there were 575 widows burnt in Bengal Presidency, 310 within the

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[1] *Ibid.*

[2] *Ibid.* For the statistics of the period 1815-28 for the above places and also other places, see Altekar, *op. cit.*, pp. 162-64; For Bengal during the same period, see Mill and Wilson, *History of British India*, ix, p. 271.

jurisdiction of the Calcutta Court. Of these 109 were above sixty years of age; 226 from forty to sixty; 208 from twenty to forty and 32 under twenty.[1] Thus by the eighteenth and the early part of the nineteenth centuries, this practice had developed into a curse, especially in eastern India where in some cases even unwilling widows were forced to commit *satī* by interested relatives. As early as 1789, Mr. M.H. Brooke, Collector of Shahabad, wrote in the course of a letter to Lord Cornwallis, that in spite of its policy of non-interference in religious matters, the Government should prohibit a practice "at which humanity shattered." In the beginning, however, the authorities were afraid of interfering in this horrible practice lest it led to grave consequences including disaffection in the army. There were as many as 98 cases of *satī* in the Patna division alone, between 1815 and 1817. In 1817, by an executive order, the burning of those widowed mothers who had children between four and seven years of age was prohibited through a circular having no legal sanction. The abolition of *satī* became possible owing to an effective combination of three forces : (i) measures adopted on the ground of administrative necessity by the company's Government in India, (ii) attempts on the part of Christian missionaries and (iii) the growth of an enlightened public opinion as part of the Indian Renaissance.[2]

Thus, in 1828, A.D. Lord William Bentick, the then Governor-General of India, decided to do away with this practice in British territory. In this move he got support from a powerful section of Indian reformists,

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[1] Max Muller, *Biographical Essays* (1884); Mill & Wilson, *op. cit.*, ix, p. 271.

[2] *Bihar through the Ages*, pp. 682-83.

headed by the famous Raja Ram Mohan Roy and other leaders of the *Brahma Samāja*.

Lord Bentick was, however, met by fierce opposition both from Indians and Europeans. Strong protests were uttered everywhere. From the *Samācāra Candrikā*[1] (a Bengali Journal from Calcutta), we learn that this move was bitterly criticised by the editors and an influential section of the public. Religious meetings were organised by the orthodox Paṇḍitas all over the country, especially in Calcutta who voiced their strong condemnation of this Act of the Government. Petitions and counter-petitions, memoranda, letters etc. were submitted to the Governor-General by all the sections of the people. There was thus a great agitation and commotion among the people all over the country. But once resolved, Lord Bentick carried the regulation in Council on the 4th of December 1829 (Regulation XVII) which made all who encouraged *satī* guilty of culpable homicide.

The regulation was later challenged before the Privy Council in England, but the appeal ultimately fell through. The enactment of the Legislation soon told on the custom which gradually lost the popular sanction and became almost extinct. Apart from the British territory, the prohibition of *satī* was made a feature of the treaties between the then Imperial Government and the Indian States. Nevertheless, it could not be banned altogether. Age-old superstitions and prejudices die hard. Man's vanity and prejudices sometime assume extraordinary shapes which defy rigorous laws and checks, for social reforms must come from the bottom, and not from the top and only then

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[1] *Samācāra-Candrikā*, Calcutta, Aug. 8, 1829.

they produce the desired results which are effective and lasting. *Satī* was no doubt banned by regulation and was made punishable but its fading glory and halo still haunted men's mind and they could not fully do away with it in spite of all threatenings and punishments. It is, therefore, not surprising to find that occasional cases of *satī* still occurred in the territory of the Indian States and outside.[1] On the death of Ranjit Singh in 1839 A.D., in spite of the implicit injunctions against this measure in Sikhism and the Act of 1829, several of his widows were burnt. Jung Bahadur, the Prime-Minister of Nepal, used his influence in vain to prevent this practice, and on his death in 1877 several women burnt with his corpse. In Berar (Hyderabad) in spite of the promulgation of the orders issued by the Nizam in 1847, burning of a *satī* took place. A Hindu woman after the death of her husband immolated and burned herself and did not listen to the prohibition of the Deshmukh. The Resident thereupon requested the Nizam to enforce the orders which he had formerly issued. And after a good deal of correspondence between the Resident and the Nizam's *peshkar*, a second order was issued, but that was of no avail and the Resident was mortified to receive now and then intimation of the occurrences of *satī* from various parts of Hyderabad.[2] Smt. Nayantara Sahgal, daughter of Smt. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit and niece of Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru, has in her biography given a very interesting story of this custom. It is said that her (Nayantara's) great-grand-mother, Gopikā, fortunate mother of eight sons and five daughters, was the last of the Marathi women of the

[1] For such cases of *satī* in Indian States, see Altekar, *op. cit.*, pp. 165-67.

[2] For other details, see *Proc. Ind. Hist. Cong.*, 1953, pp. 341-43 ("Satī in Hyderabad").

village to commit *satī*.[1] Thus we find that outside and sometimes even within the British Jurisdiction *satī* continued in the families of high rank until late in the 19th century and early part of the 20th century.

## The Latest Instances

Though over a hundred years have passed since the legislation banning this custom was first enforced, we have even to this day some flashes of this deep-rooted practice here and there. Occasional cases of *satī* are attempted and even accomplished. Those who sacrifice themselves are looked upon with reverence. The recent tendency on the part of some Hindus to justify every thing mediaeval or ancient has encouraged the suppressed and condemned practice to rise again. Two cases were reported in the Gaya district of Bihar in 1901 and 1903. At Barh (Patna district of Bihar) there was an abetted *satī* case in November 1929 and in 1930 a widow in the Hazaribagh district (Bihar) attempted to immolate herself.[2] A case of *satī* occurred in 1913, while another took place in Rajasthan in 1952. But the latest instances we have in the following cases :

(i) "Jhansi, June 11 (1954)—An 18-year-old Rajput girl became *satī* in the village of Bamauri, near Lalitpur, in the Jhansi district, following the death of her husband.

"Despite persuasions by her relatives, it is said, she remained adamant and marched with the funeral procession and sat down on her husband's pyre and was consumed by the flames.

"It is reported that the girl's father and brothers-in-law have been taken into custody by the police."[3]

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[1] Nayantara Sahgal, *Prison and Chocolate Cake*.
[2] *Bihar through the Ages*, pp. 682-83.
[3] *The National Herald*, Lucknow, June 12, 1954

(ii) "Jodhpur, Oct. 23 (1954)—The Pujārī, who is alleged to have performed the funeral rites of the late Brigadier Zabbar Singh, Comptroller of the Jodhpur Maharaja's household, on Tuesday, when his widow committed *satī*, has been arrested under Sec. 306, I.P.C. (Indian Penal Code : abetment of suicide), according to the investigating officer, Mr. S. M. Surana, S. P., Jodhpur.

"A party of journalists who motored down to Sir Pertap Singhji's Thada, found hundreds of people still offering coconuts and going round the spot where the cremation took place.

"Later, inquiries made at the residence of the Late Brigadier revealed that after her husband's death on the evening of October 18, the Thakurani appeared determined to die. She did not allow anybody in the room and sat through the night with her husband's head in her lap chanting 'Rāma, Rāma……"

"Just after the Brigadier's death she had bedecked herself in her marriage jewellery and dress. She then gave one of her bangles to her son and wished him all happiness.

"No one could tell, probably for fear of the police-investigation as to how she managed to accompany the body in the truck up to the cremation ground and who lit the pyre.

"Anti-Police slogans were shouted by hundreds of people when the police went to the cremation ground the next morning to collect the remains of the couple for investigation."[1]

These two instances make it clear that in spite of all protests and legislations, the practice of *satī* has not

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[1] *The Statesman*, Calcutta, Oct. 25, 1954. For the latest instance of *satī* which occurred on November 8, 1961 in a village of Jaipur, see *The Searchlight*, Patna, November 14, 1961.

died out, it is yet living. The daily newspapers of the country often flash out news-items concerning *sahamaraṇa* or *satī*. But one thing is clear that the practice though confined to a small coterie has now lost all force and appeal and popular sanction and support. As a matter of fact, it is now heard once in years and is as good as dead and has really faded away from the people's memory.

Even today the Raj Gonds—an aboriginal tribe of Hyderabad—maintain numerous shrines of *satī*. These shrines contain the *satī* and *ban*, symbols of the ancestors of the Sitagondi branch of the Atram clan. "While other clans have usually one *satī* shrine which contains in addition the pot with the *chauwur*, here the Rajas' lineage, the Katora's lineage and the Patel's lineage have each a separate shrine, and together the *satī* in these three shrines represent all the ancestors of the clan. No one knows whether these shrines, so like the huts erected over tombs, stand on sites where there were once actually the graves or burning-places of prominent clan-members, but this is by no means improbable, considering that round about are many tombs of recently deceased Atram clansmen."[1]

## Observations and Conclusions

It has been alleged in certain quarters by interested persons, especially European authors, who failed to appreciate this spiritual sacrifice at the altar of pure love for one's motherland and husband and took only the materialistic aspect of its sheer self-destruction, that the rite was a barbarous one and was devoid of

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[1] Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, *The Aboriginal Tribes of Hyderabad*, vol. iii, Bk. I, p. 291. For other details see, "Satī in Hyderabad" in the *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, 1953.

any spiritual tinge whatever. But this is a biased interpretation of historical facts. As a matter of fact life seems to have been deemed of small account in those ages and "though the death of women or men on the funeral pyre of the husband or for their masters appears to us sophisticated people of modern days as very horrible, yet it did not so appear to the ancients."[1] Moreover, in ancient times *satī* was not a practice imposed by priests or men on unwilling women as some Western scholars would have us believe. The institution somehow grew and, as is natural with all the institutions of the world, it imbibed some weaknesses too. It is true, sometimes the force of popular sentiment compelled even an unwilling woman to take to this recourse, but it is absurd to suggest that men imposed it on women. Often excesses were committed in the name of religious observances. But not only the Hindus are to blame for this. We have already shown above how suicide and the horrible rite of infanticide were committed by Muslims and believers in other religions of the world. The religious history of the world is full of such glaring instances which record how innumerable wars were fought and thousands of men massacred in the name of religion. The so-called Crusades speak for themselves! The historical evolution of such rites clearly demonstrates that the rite was first confined to kings and nobles, as the lot of the wives of all the vanquished kings and defeated warriors was most miserable in all countries including India. Those poor wives were carried as captives and made to work as slaves, generally as concubines. From kings, the practice spread among

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[1] P. V. Kane, *op. cit.*, p. 630.

the Brāhmaṇas, though voices of protests were uttered all through. "But once it took root," observes P.V. Kane, "learned commentators and digest-writers were found to support it with arguments and promises of future rewards. Even in modern times we can secure learned writers to support any pet theory of a coterie or clique."[1]

The high figure for *satī* in Bengal has induced several writers to believe that unlike other parts of India, as *dāyabhāga*[2]—according to which the widow of a sonless member in a joint Hindu family is entitled to practically the same rights over joint family property which the deceased husband would have had—prevailed in Bengal, this must have frequently induced the surviving members "to get rid of the widow by appealing at a most distressing hour to her devotion to and love for husband."[3] These scholars further believe that the reason that Benares, the orthodox seat of Hinduism, had comparatively a very small number of *satī*, as shown above, was that no such system as *dāyabhāga* existed there and that the rights of widows were insignificant. It is true that the number of widows in Bengal was sometimes very large, but in the face of the evidence gleaned from the cuttings of contemporary newspapers and periodicals, already quoted above, it is impossible to believe that most of the widows were coerced into doing it. From epigraphic and other sources we learn that in most cases the relations of the widows tried to dissuade them from treading such a dangerous path. But all the persuasions and dissuasions mostly fell on deaf ears and produced no desired

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[1] Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, vol. ii, pt. i, chap. xv, p. 630.
[2] vide., *Dāyabhāga*, ed. by Jīvānanda, 1893, pp. 46-56, etc.
[3] Kane, *op. cit.*, p. 635.

effect on the intending wives who listened to no reason and argument. Colebrooke, who had spent the best part of his life in Bengal wrote as far back as in 1795 A.D.: "Happily the martyrs of this superstition have never been numerous. It is certain that the instances of widow's sacrifices are now rare."[1]

That this practice lacked popular sanction and feeling evoked no disturbance of peace or violent resistance, as apprehended by a section of the people and officials as well. Above all, it also shows that the people no longer cherished any deep-seated convictions about its absolute religious necessity.

Modern India does not justify this practice. "But it is a warped mentality that rebukes modern Indians for expressing admiration and reverence for the cool and unfaltering courage of Indian women in becoming *satīs* or performing the *Jauhar* for cherishing their ideals of womanly conduct."[2] If the English or the French can pride in their past institutions, however absurd they might have been, Indians also have every right to express admiration for those brave ladies, to whom life meant nothing. In the words of G.C. Hutton, "to crown all, the matchless constancy and fearless indifference of death in the Indian widow, who voluntarily mounts the funeral pyre in the expectation of accompanying her husband to a region of bliss."[3]

Let us conclude with Poet Rabindranath Tagore, whose homage to *satī* is rather a monumental piece of literature and a class by itself:

"Salutations be to those grandmothers of Bengal, who sacrificed their lives. She who nurtured the

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[1] Colebrooke, *Miscellaneous Essays*, vol. i, p. 122.
[2] P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, vol. ii, chap. xv.
[3] G. C. Hutton, *A Glossary of Bengali and English*, 1825 A.D.

nation, do not forget her even if you be in the heaven. O Āryan women, promote your beloved sons from troubles and anxieties of the world. You were not aware of it, even in dream that by your self-denied chivalry the famous heroes of the world were ashamed. As in the night you would put yourself silently in the bed-stead of your husband after completion of the domestic works; on the last day of conjugal bliss after retiring from household duties, adorning yourself like a newly wedded wife and taking the *sindūra* (vermillion-mark) between the parting of your hair with ease and comfort you have put yourself in the funeral pyre of your husband. You have beautified the death and sanctified it too. You have made the funeral pyre a place of eternal bliss like the bed-stead of a newly wedded couple. By your sacred sacrifice of yourself the flames of Bengal have purified. Our history is mute and silent but the eternal fire has been preaching your message. We will bow down before the fire which is imperishable, which carries your living memories.... which is the emblem of your final union.....Death, how easy, how glowing, and how noble it is....."[1]

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[1] Translated from the original Bengali, quoted in D. C. Sen's *Vṛhata-Baṅga*, vol. ii. I am very much indebted to my learned friend, Dr. Chinmoy Dutt, Lecturer in Comparative Philology, Calcutta University, who very kindly translated the original passage in Bengali into English for me.

CHAPTER V

# SUICIDE IN CONTEMPORARY CIVILISATIONS

From the opinions held or given on suicide in ancient, mediaeval and modern India we now propose to pass on to suicide as prevalent among peoples of other equally advanced civilisations. A comparative study in the methods and kinds of suicides in the contemporary world is, indeed, quite interesting as it shows that the peoples of the different countries resort to self-destruction motivated by almost the same causes as are responsible for such acts in India. In other words, human nature is same everywhere and so are its inherent weaknesses. Man wants to live his life fully and happily, but his circumstances—social, economic etc.,—often make him quite indifferent to the attractions and joys of this life, when life loses meaning to him, and death makes no difference. Mentally depressed and broken-hearted, he approaches death instead of waiting for it. Viewed in this context it would be seen that the causes everywhere are identical, though often we have slight differences in kind and method employed for the purpose. Notwithstanding all this, we have to remember that religion has always been at the root of the causes of suicide in all the countries in all the ages. The story of suicide is, therefore, the story of mankind irrespective of geographical barriers and historical anomalies. Religion accompanied with superstitions has played havoc with the lives of men in the past, which they have not yet got rid of.

In China, suicide was extremely common among all classes and persons of all ages.[1] Its literature and history are full of such illustrations. "In a Chinese novelette the heroine commits suicide on the grave of her betrothed lover to avoid the marriage arranged for her with her rival, and that rival thereupon takes his own life in order to pursue, in the other world, at once his quest for his bride and vengeance on her lover."[2] Innumerable cases of suicide are recorded in biographical notices, which above all, include generals (after defeat), tyrants, statesmen, dethroned rulers, captives, ministers, women (to avoid marriage deemed by them to be shameful), fathers, sons, widows, wives and brides (who have lost their lives in preserving their chastity), etc.[3] Chu Yuan (340-278 B.C.) was a great Chinese poet, patriot and people's hero. His life was a tragedy. Banished from the Court by his beloved king he took his own life by drowning. "But his country and people sympathised with him and all China has bemoaned his fate for the past two thousand years. Even today, they commemorate his death by a colourful festival."[4]

In accordance with the principles of the new Buddhism and the *Legende doree* of the eternal Buddhism, self-surrender culminating in voluntary death has been held in honour in various Buddhist countries including China and Japan. It happens (or it used to happen) that Chinese monks beg for fuel, build a funeral pyre,

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[1] Gray, *China*, i, 320; Huc, *The Chinese Empire*, p. 181; Matignon, "Le suicide en Chine" in *Archives d' anthropologic Criminelle*, xii, pp. 367 ff; Ball, *Things Chinese*, pp. 564 ff.

[2] *ERE*, xii, 26.

[3] For details, cf. W. F. Meyers' *Chinese Reader's Manual*, London, 1910.

[4] *The Bharat Jyoti*, Bombay, Sunday, May 23, 1954.

sit cross-legged on it, cover their head with linen soaked in oil, and set themselves on fire. With some branches of the Chinese Mahāyāna, the "burning of the skull" is an essential part of ordination as a "future Buddha"—a symbol of the extreme form of sacrifice for which human courage is nowadays inadequate.[1]

In China, hanging, leaping down from a wall, and opium-poisoning have been perhaps the most common methods of suicide. Social and religious feelings have never inhibited suicide. On the other hand, they have approved of it in certain circumstances, for instance, where marriage is forced on a widow or a bride whose betrothed bridegroom has died. Very often protests were uttered and "suicide is classified by Chinese as an offence against religion on the ground that a person owes his being to Heaven, and is, therefore, responsible to Heaven for due care of the gift."[2]

A common cause of suicide in modern China (of course, before the dawn of the new People's Republic), admired as "heroic", was the one committed for the purpose of taking revenge upon an enemy, otherwise out of reach. This is according to Chinese thought, "a most effective mode of revenge" for two reasons :— (i) the law throws the responsibility of the deed on him who occasioned it and (ii) the "disembodied soul is supposed to be better able than the living man to prosecute the enemy."[3] The Chinese believe that such deaths harass the enemy by visitations of the revengeful ghosts.

It is also their firm belief that whilst persons who kill themselves out of loyalty, filial piety, chastity or

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[1] *ERE*, xii, p. 26.

[2] Alabaster, *Notes and Commentaries on Chinese Criminal Law*, p. 304.

[3] Huc, *op. cit.*, p. 181; Matignon, *op. cit.*, pp. 371 ff; Ball, *op. cit.*, pp. 566 ff; Westermarck, *op. cit.*, ii, pp. 242 ff; *ERE*, xii, p. 26.

friendship "will go to heaven," those who commit such acts "in a trivial burst of rage, or fearing the consequences of a crime which would not amount to death or in the hope of falsely injuring a fellow-creature,"[1] will be severely punished in the internal regions, and no pardon is granted to them.

To sum up, hanging, leaping down from a wall and opium-poisoning have been the most common methods of suicide, "the last may diminish in frequency under the present opium-restrictions." Though it is difficult to have accurate figures, the general impression, however, is that suicides are much more frequent in China than in Great Britain or any other Western country.

Japan may rightly be termed as "a land of suicides." Suicides are an ordinary occurrence there. Griffins has precisely summed up the Japanese attitude to suicide in the following words: "The Japanese calendar of saints is not filled with reformers, almsgivers and founders of hospitals or orphanages, but is overcrowded with canonised suicides and committers of *harākiri*. Even today, no man more surely draws homage to his tomb, securing even apotheosis than the suicide, though he may have committed a crime."[2] It is recorded that in the Japanese sect of Sukhāvatī, religious suicide was not unknown. In 1422, a large company of persons, after hearing a stirring sermon by a zealot to the effect that paradise may be gained solely by calling on the name of Amitābha (the Buddha), committed suicide by walking into the sea while repeating the Buddhist mantra: '*Namu Amida Butsu.*'[3]

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[1] Giles, *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, ii, pp. 363-65.
[2] Griffins, *Religions of Japan*, p. 112.
[3] *ERE*, xii, p. 26, fn. 3.

Among the methods of suicide the following three were unique :—

(I) *Harākiri* or "belly-cutting," or more commonly called *seppuku*. This *harākiri* was of two kinds—(a) obligatory and (b) voluntary. The former was recognised as one of the three forms of capital punishment, under the laws of the Tang period in China, and a model of the Japanese legal system. But this was allowed only to the offenders of rank to merely escape the shame of public death at the hands of others. The members of the royal family and others, above the fifth court-rank, were, under criminal laws of Japan, given the right of self-execution, but not in the case of high treason. "This practice of *harākiri* dates from the Taira and Minamoto period in the 12th century A.D., and was widely practised during the Sengoku period of internal strife. Gradually the practice developed "into a complicate system with much etiquette and formality."[1]

Voluntary *harākiri* was practised out of loyalty to a dead superior or "in order to protest when other protests might be unavailing, against the erroneous conduct of a living superior or to avoid beheading by the enemy in a lost battle, or to restore injured honour if revenge was impossible."[2] The Japanese believed that *harākiri*, committed under any circumstances, "cleansed from every stain and ensured an honourable interment and a respected memory."[3] The ceremony in old days used to be performed in a temple.

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[1] cf., T. Harda, *Faith of Japan*, (New York, 1914), p. 129.
[2] Westermarck, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, p. 243.
[3] *Ibid.*; Chamberlain, *Things Japanese*, p. 219 ff; Rein, *Japan*, p. 328; Mitford, *Tales of Old Japan*, ii, p. 193 ff.

(II) The other method, *shinju* or *aitaishi* (dying between two parties) was the death together of unhappy lovers who sought escape from the difficulties of their earthly lot and entrance to a happier life in the next world. During the seventeenth century this practice was very common.

(III) The third one was *junshi*— a suicide committed upon the death of one's lord or master with the idea of following him into the next world. In olden days this usually came to be reckoned as "an act of loyalty required by custom, until the emperor Suinin (29 B.C.-A.D. 70) ordered the substitution of clay-images for the bodies of attendants and favourite animals." But this practice was revived during the feudal period, "not as a requirement but as a voluntary custom whereby loyal followers, through *harākiri* expressed their devotion to their masters"[1]—a practice well founded in mediaeval India. The spirit of *junshi* caught their imagination so much so that the most striking manifestations of it are discerned in the drowning of almost the entire Taira clan in the Western Sea at the downfall of that clan and the *junshi* of the hundreds of the family of Hojo Takātoki, at the end of his career, just like the rite of *Jauhar* among the Rajputs in India. It came to be forbidden only in the 18th century A.D.

From the statistics compiled by the Bureau of Statistics of the Japanese Government in 1915, we learn that out of the total 1,037,016 deaths, death by suicide was 11,128 in 1912 A.D.; out of the total 1,027,257, that by suicide was 11,942 in 1913 A.D. and out of the total 1,101,815, that by suicide was 12,705 in 1914 A.D. In other words, while the number of total deaths

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[1] *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. xii, p. 37.

comparatively decreased, deaths by suicide proportionately increased year by year.

Going back to the 18th century we find that the most notable case of *harākiri* is that of the 47 Ronin in 1703 A.D. "The *daimyo* Asans had been obliged to commit *harākiri* to atone for an unjustifiable attack upon Kira, a noble man in the Shogun's palace. A band of devoted followers, after long efforts, avenged their master by assassinating Kira. They gave themselves up to justice and, under sentence, committed *harākiri* at the homes of the *daimyos* to whom in groups they had been entrusted. Their bodies were buried with respect at a Buddhist temple in Tokyo; and to this day many admirers of their chivalrous loyalty pay homage at their tomb."[1]

*Harākiri*, though no longer recognised as a form of public execution, is yet not uncommon, especially among those who seek to avoid the supposed disgrace of capture by the forces of the enemy in the war. The committing of *harākiri* by Tozo and other Japanese Generals and soldiers on a mass scale during World War II, on the eve of Japan's defeat at the hands of the allies, is still fresh in the memory of the people of the world. This practice has not yet died out and is often resorted to by people, specially monks, in order to press their demands, as is clear from the following incidents that occurred very recently :

"Seoul, Nov. 25 (1960)—Celibate monks yesterday staged a wild rampage inside the Supreme Court here, sacking the Justice's office and breaking window-panes, in a protest against the court's ruling against the monk's

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[1] *Ibid.* p. 37.

demand for full ownership and control of vast temple property in south Korea.

"Six monk-leaders, when refused an interview by the Supreme Court Chief Justice, committed *Harākiri* on the spot and were carried to a nearby hospital, two of them critically wounded.

"Some 200—shaven-headed, grey-robed monks demonstrated outside the court-building.

"Baton-charging police clashed with some 70 rioting monks inside the Justice's Office, knocking down unconscious at least a dozen monks, before hauling them to Police-headquarters."[1]

"Tokyo, Nov. 2 (1960)—Otoya Yamaguchi, 17-year-old student who assassinated the Japanese socialist leader last month, tonight hanged himself, police announced here."[2]

*Shinju* or *aitaishi*, i.e., "dying between two parties"—was banned in 1723 A.D. during the Tokugawa period. The practice is now practically extinct.

The practice of *junshi* was also banned in 1744 A.D. by the Shogunate. The most startling instance of this practice in recent years was seen in the death by *harākiri* of General Nogi and his wife at the time of the funeral of the Emperor Meiji in September, 1912.[3]

In recent years other forms of death such as by poisoning or mutilation, falling beneath trains, etc. have gained popularity in Japan. Of these, poisoning appears to include poisoning by corrosives and by gas. Hanging and drowning are also favourite methods to commit suicide with both sexes. The novel method started by the Post-war Japanese Government to arrest the

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[1] *The Searchlight*, Patna, Nov. 27, 1960.
[2] *Ibid.*, Nov. 3, 1960.
[3] *ERE*, xii, p. 37.

fast growth of suicide has already been discussed in the previous chapter. This experiment is no doubt worthy of emulation by all the civilised Governments of the world.

Suicide was once a great urge among the people of Russia to enter heaven. Sometimes it took the form of an epidemic. But the mania "in its most extreme form died away towards the end of the seventeenth century. During the 18th and the 19th centuries, however, cases of collective suicides from religious motives occurred from time to time."[1]

A very interesting episode occurred during the days of the great Russian revolution. It is said, "when her lover was killed in the Moscow uprising of December, 1917, and was buried at the *Red Funeral*, the rebel lass leaped into the grave, flung herself prostrate upon the coffin that held him and cried out—"Bury me too : what do I care about the Revolution now that he is dead!"[2] A case much similar to that of *satī* in India.

Thus a careful investigation into the cases of suicide all over the world gives the impression that highly civilised nations have an equally high rate of suicide. As in India, so in other countries almost the same modes or methods are employed. A strange feature of the Burmese social life is self-immolation. "Their sense of shame is said to be so acute that on being accused of any evil act by several of the community, the person so accused retires to some secluded spot, and digs his grave and strangles himself."[3] They are said to be very sensitive to raillery, and have "a peculiar delicacy

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[1] Fraser, *Golden Bough*, pt. iii; *The Dying God*, London, 1911, p. 441; *ERE*, xii, p. 22.

[2] *ERE*. xii, p. 22 ff.

[3] Westermarck, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 240 ff; *ERE*, xii, pp. 26 ff.

of feeling of dread for what they call *a-shet* or shame, and show a great disregard of life by committing suicide for the most trifling causes."[1]

J. P. Briggs has narrated several cases of such instances in his book.[2] From one such story we learn how a young husband, ashamed of not being thought good enough by his wife's women-friends and annoyed at her for not defending him, went away and hung himself. A. Fytche[3] has another interesting story to tell. A girl of about fifteen years of age, on being scolded and boxed by ears by her mother for losing her oranges in gambling, purchased opium, enough to poison two or three people, and swallowed it up. She then returned to her mother and quietly told her what she had done. She further told her that she would never have the power to ill-treat her again. The mother, greatly alarmed, and in the wildest grief, hugging her child to her bosom, rushed off to the Government Hospital, where the surgeon being fortunately present at the time, was able to save her life.

Among the Karens of Burma suicide is likewise very common. According to Westermarck, "if a man has some incurable or painful disease, he says in a matter-of-fact way that he will hang himself, and he does as he says. If a girl's parents compel her to marry the man she does not love, she hangs herself. Wives sometimes hang themselves through jealousy, sometimes because they quarrel with their husbands and sometimes out of mere chagrin when they are subjected to depreciative comparisons; and it is a favourite threat with a wife or daughter, when not allowed to have

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[1] *Ibid.*
[2] Briggs, *Heathen and Holy Lands*, pp. 1 ff.
[3] Fytche, *Burma : Past and Present*, pp. 1 ff.

her own way, that she will hang herself."[1]

Thus, only momentary annoyance, or shock of their pride, furnishes them with sufficient cause for self-destruction, and opium is one of the favourite means employed for the purpose. In other words, suicide is a very common phenomenon with the Karens, especially the womenfolk, and a slight provocation is enough to drive them on to self-destruction.[2]

### In the Western World

We have already noted above that suicide was a common phenomenon with the Greeks, the Romans, the Egyptians and other races with an ancient civilisation. If the Indian Dharmaśāstra-writers had some thing to say for and against this practice, the Western philosophers also discussed this abnormal act on grounds of morality. The divergent views of different philosophers vividly reflect upon the greater difference between classical and Christian doctrines in regard to suicide. We have numerous views—views often clashing with counter-views. While the Greek tragedians advocate that suicide in certain circumstances is becoming to a noble mind,[3] Socrates[4] disfavours the idea and Aristotle[5] even declares such persons as offenders

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[1] Westermarck, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 231-32, 240-41; Mason in *JASB*, XXXVII, pt. ii, p. 141.

[2] For other details, see Westermarck, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 240-41.

[3] Schmidt, *Die Ethik der alten Griechen*, Vol. II, pp. 442 ff; Euripides, *Troades*, pp. 1012 ff; *Idem*, *Hippolytus*, p. 715 seq; *Idem*, *Helena*, p. 134 seq.; Sophocles, *Antigone*, pp. 1234 ff; *Idem*, *Ajax*, p. 470 seq.; cf. *Ibid.* p. 654 seq. Euripides, *Supplices*, pp. 1000 ff; Pausanias, iv, 2.7; Strabo, *Geographica*, X, 5.6, p. 486; Aelian, *Varia historia*, iii, p. 37 etc.

[4] Plato, *Phoedro*, p. 62.

[5] Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, v. 11.3.

against State.[1] Plato in his *Laws* does not condemn those who kill themselves "under the compulsion of some painful and inevitable misfortune, or out of irremediable and intolerable shame."[2]

The Stoics generally advocate suicide "as a relief from all kinds of misery." Seneca's views are more pronounced and eloquent on this topic. According to him, "it is a man's own fault, if he suffers, as, by putting an end to himself, he can put an end to his misery.....so would I choose the most tolerable death when about to die.....Human affairs are in such a happy situation that no one need be wretched but by choice. Do you like to be wretched? Live. Do you like it not? It is in your power to return from whence you came?"[3] In other words, Seneca advocates in favour of suicide for, according to him, it is the easiest means to get rid of this wretched life. But, Epictetus is opposed to indiscriminate suicides on religious grounds: "Friends, wait for God; when He shall give the signal and release you from this service, then go to Him...."[4] Pliny advocates the power of dying whenever a man pleases to do so.[5]

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[1] *ERE*, xii, pp. 24 ff. But in spite of this strong denunciation both Socrates and Aristotle fell victims to this offence. Socrates was forced to drink poison by the State, but as Diogenes Laertius (Grote, 22; Zeller, 1,37 note) tells us, Aristotle, in utter disappointment with the turn of all things against him, committed suicide by drinking hemlock (also see Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy*, p. 94).

[2] Plato, *Leges*, ix, 873; *Laws*, 873 c.; also cf. his *Republic*, p. 615. For other details see *ERE*, xii, pp. 31-32.

[3] cf. Seneca, *EP*, xii, 10; also see *ERE*, xii, 30 ff; Seneca, *Epistulae*, 70.

[4] Epictetus, *Dissert.*, i, 24, I, ix, 16; also see *ERE*, xii, p. 24; Lecky, *History of European Morals*, i, 214, fn. 1.

[5] *EP*, iii, 7; vi, 24; iii, 16; *Historia naturalis*, ii, 5 (7).

Roman people seem to have held an indifferent attitude towards suicide before they came under the influence of Christianity. To Virgil, self-murderers are not guilty but unfortunates—persons condemned to die on a false charge. The history of pagan Rome records no statute declaring suicide to be a crime, "though it was prohibited in the case of soldiers." The self-murderer's rights were in no way affected by his deed, his memory was no less honoured than if he had died a natural death, "his will was recognised by Law, and the regular order of succession was not interfered with."[1] Not only that, suicide in most cases was reckoned as "an heroic and praiseworthy act"[2] in Rome. Even Cicero, the follower of Pythagoras, approved of the death of Cato.[3]

Suicides, when committed in order to "procure martyrdom, or to avoid apostacy, or to retain the crown of virginity," were allowed or even approved of, by the earlier Christian Fathers, though voluntary death was denounced by Lactantius[4] as "wicked and impious." We have again several instances of Christian women putting an end to their lives when "their chastity was in danger" and their acts are spoken of with "tenderness and even admiration; nay some of them were admitted into the calendar of saints."[5]

From the writings of Jerome and other Christian preachers we learn that this admission was "due to the

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[1] *AEN*, xii, pp. 595 ff.

[2] For heroic suicide, see *ERE*, xii, pp. 31 ff.

[3] cf. the well-known passage of Cicero in his *De Officiis*, i, pp. 111 ff. (trans. G.B. Gardiner, London, 1899); *Idem*, *De Officiis*, i, 31 (112).

[4] Lactantius, *Divinoe Institutiones*, vi, (De vero cultu).

[5] Westermarck, *op. cit.*, ii, p. 251, fn. 6.

extreme honour in which Christianity was held."[1] But Augustine holds no brief for this even. Suicide is prohibited under commandment—"thou shalt not kill, neither thyself nor another." Self-murder was declared by the Church to be "the worst form of murder" and "the most grievous thing of all." It was even pointed out that Judas in killing himself committed a greater sin "than in betraying his master Christ to a certain death."[2]

Several other restrictions were also enforced. The self-murderer was deprived of his rights which were granted to all other criminals. In the sixth century a council of Orleans issued the following injunctions: "the oblations of those who were killed in the commission of any crime may be received, except of such as laid violent hands on themselves."[3] And, a subsequent Council denied self-murderers "the usual rites of Christian burial." The Christian doctrine, formulated by Thomas Aquinas declared that "the man who deliberately takes away the life which was given him by the Creator displays the utmost disregard for the will and authority of his Master; and worst of all, he does so in the very last minute of his life, when his doom is sealed for ever."[4] Thus, by denying such persons the rite of Christian burial the Church recognises that he has placed himself outside her pale.

A study in suicides in the Christian world during the mediaeval period reveals that self-destruction was held in utter contempt by the Church and the authorities concerned. The Church strongly condemned it and

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[1] St. Jerome, *Commentarii in Jonam*, i, p. 12.
[2] Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, p. i, p. 16 seq.
[3] For details, see Westermarck, *op., cit.*, ii, pp. 251-53.
[4] *Ibid.*

this, in turn, influenced the secular legislation or the law-books. Louis IX, in France, took the lead and decreed that the self-murderer's property should be confiscated. Other European countries also followed suit. Louis XIV of France further assimilated the crime of suicide to that of *lese-majeste*.[1] In Scotland, self-murder came to be regarded "as highly criminal as the killing of our neighbour."[2] England regarded suicide as "murder committed by a man on himself,"[3] and unless declared insane "the self-murderer forfeited his property as late as the year 1870 when forfeitures for felony were abolished."[4] Not only that, the dead body of a woman who put an end to her life by drowning herself in Edinburgh in 1598 A.D. was "hurled through the town backwards, and thereafter hanged on the gallows."[5] Self-murderers in France, as late as the middle of the 18th century, met almost the same fate as did their counterparts in England.[6] It is important to bear in mind that such kind of treatment, in most cases, had two objects. While punishment was one, the other was intended to prevent their spirits causing mischief to others. This religious superstition was prevalent all over Europe, like India.

The suicides were not given a generous treatment. They were generally buried apart from other dead, may be, due to fear. England had a peculiar custom of her

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[1] *Ibid.*, 254; *Bourquelot*, in *Bibliotheque de l'Ecole des chartes*, iv. 263; Morselli, *Il Suicidio*, pp. 196 ff; Louis XIV, Ordonnance criminelle, A. D. 1670, xxii-1, in Isambert, Decrusy, and Taillandier, *Recueil general des anciennes lois francaises*, xviii, 414.

[2] Erskine-Rankine, *Principles of the Law of Scotland*, p. 559.

[3] Stephen, *History of the Criminal Law of England*, iii, p. 104.

[4] Stephen, *op. cit.*, iii, p. 105.

[5] Ross, 'Superstitions as to burying Suicides in the Highlands' in *Celtic Magazine*, xii, p. 354.

[6] Serpillon, *Code Criminel*, ii, p. 223.

own. "Persons against whom a Coroner's jury had found a verdict of *felo de se* were buried at cross-roads, with a stake driven through the body in order to prevent their ghosts from walking"[1]—a custom which was formally abolished in 1823. The most interesting of all was that in many cases the bodies of suicides were burned instead of being buried or interned—a very unusual practice unknown to the Western world![2]

It is not that suicides were always viewed with extreme severity. Westermarck has collected volumes of evidences to show that we have in the "Middle Ages instances of more humane feelings towards its perpetrator. In mediaeval tales and ballads, true lovers die together and are buried in the same grave; two roses spring through the turf and twine lovingly together."[3] Moreover, the revival of classical learning, "not only increased the number of suicides but influenced popular sentiments on the subject."[4] Suicides, committed to avoid dishonour or probable sin, came to be viewed with favour. Thomas More in his *Utopia*[5] permits a person suffering from an incurable and painful disease to take his own life, of course with the consent of the priests and magistrates. Donne, the well-known Dean of St. Paul's, declared that "self-homicide is not so naturally sin, that it never be otherwise."[6] Montaigne,[7] in one of his essays, pictures "classical cases of suicides with colours of unmistakable sympathy."

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[1] Stephen, *op. cit.*, iii, p. 105. For other details see Westermarck, *op. cit.*, ii, p. 256, fn. 2.

[2] *Ibid.*, ii, pp. 254 ff.

[3] Westermarck, *op. cit.*, ii, p. 257; also see his *Christianity and Morals*.

[4] Bourquelot, iv, p. 253.

[5] More, *Utopia*, p. 122.

[6] Donne, *Biathanatos*, p. 45.

[7] Montaigne, *Essais*, ii, 3.

The statistics for England and Wales show that suicide is considerably higher among the educated than the illiterate classes. In the United States of America about 22,000 persons kill themselves every year. "Under present conditions of mortality 10 males and 3 females out of every 1,000 born, will eventually take their own lives."[1] The statistics for the United States also show that the suicide for whites is considerably higher than that for negroes. In this connection it is significant to remember that the suicide-rate for unoccupied males in England and Wales is enormously greater than for those who are occupied—probably a very common feature all the world over.

Europe in the eighteenth century was a hot-bed of revolutions—revolutions in politics and in ideas as well. Rationalism had taken a deep root by this time. The views of the Church and the Laws of the State were fiercely attacked and relentlessly criticised by the great thinkers and philosophers of the age, for instance, by Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, and others. Montesquieu held suicide as legitimate.[2] Voltaire strongly condemned the laws "which subjected a suicide's body to outrage and deprived his children of his heritage."[3] According to him, if suicide were a crime, war was still a greater crime and "much more harmful to the human race than self-murder."[4] Both Beccaria and Holbach condemned the laws as absurd.[5] Hume vehemently attacked the doctrine that "suicide is a transgression of our duty to God," and declared, "if it would be no

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[1] *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, xxi (sec. on suicide).
[2] *Lettres Persanes*, p. 76.
[3] *Commentaire sur le livre Des delits et des peines*, p. 19.
[4] *Idem*, *Note to Olympie*, *Acte V*, *Scene 7 etc.*
[5] Beccaria, *Dei delitti e delle pene*, 35 (*opere*, i, 101); Holbach, *Systeme de la natere*, i, p. 369.

crime in me to divert the Nile from its course, were I able to do so, how could it be a crime to turn a few ounces of blood from their natural channel?"[1] Kant held the contrary view. "A person," declared he, "who disposes of his own life, degrades humanity subsisting in his person and entrusted to him to the end that he might uphold it."[2] To Schopenhauer, suicide is an insult to humanity as a final assertion of the will to live. Just as theology is a refuge from death, so insanity is a refuge from pain. Madness comes as a way to avoid the memory of suffering. Yet the madness which has thus arisen is the lethe of unendurable suffering; it was the last remedy of harassed nature, i.e., of the will. The final refuge is suicide. Here at last strange to say, thought and imagination conquer instinct. Diogenes is said to have put an end to himself by refusing to breathe—what a victory over the will to live! But, this truimph is merely individual; the will continues in the species. Life laughs at suicide and smiles at death; for every deliberate death there are thousands of indeliberate births. "Suicide, the wilful destruction of the single phenomenal existence, is a vain and foolish act, for the thing-in-itself—the species and life and will in general—remains unaffected by it, even as the rain-bow endures however fast the drops which support it for the moment may chance to fall."[3] Fitche, Hegel and Paley are more or less of the same view.[4]

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[1] See his famous essay "of Suicide" in his *Essays and Treatises*, London, 1777; *Philosophical Works*, iv, p. 407 ff.

[2] Kant, *Metaphysische Anfangungsgrunde der Tugendlehre*, p. 73.

[3] Schopenhauer, *Introduction to the Wisdom of Life*, p. 515; Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy*, p. 329.

[4] Fitche, *Das System der Sittenlehre*, pp. 339 ff; Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, p. 70; Paley, *Principles of Moral and*

Thus, perhaps the school most nearly favourable to suicide is Utilitarianism; for starting from its definition of a good act as one which increases the sum total of human happiness (identified with pleasure), one can easily imagine cases where the death of a man by his own hand would cause little or no pain to any one and would be more or less completely a source of pleasure to many. In his famous dictum, J. S. Mill declares: "Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure."[1]

But despite all discountenances by the metaphysical schools, self-destruction was now and then justified by circumstances "of an extreme and unusual kind to make the act any thing else than cowardly and otherwise immoral."[2] With the weakening of the religious influences, however, the legislation on the subject also changed. Revolution in France saw the end of the laws operating against suicide in that country, and afterwards in other countries of Europe. These measures while they showed greater regard for the innocent relations of the victims, also effected a revolutionary change in the moral ideas concerning the law itself.[3]

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*Political Philosophy*, iv, 3 (*Complete Works*, ii, p. 230); also see Bentham, *Principles of Penal Law*, ii, 4.4. (*Works*, i, 479 seq.).

[1] J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chap. ii.

[2] *ERE*, xii, p. 24.

[3] For other details see Westermarck, *op. cit.*, ii, pp. 262-64.

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